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THE COST OF A FOLLY; OR, MISTAKEN LOVE.

BY GEORGINA DICKENS,

AUTHOR OF "A SCATHING ORDEAL," "LORD ROTH'S SIN," ETC.



"THANK HEAVEN, DEAR LOVE, I AM IN TIME TO SAVE YOU!"

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OR, MISTAKEN LOVE.

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CHAPTER I.

MY FIRST INVITATION.

"We cannot possibly accept for Margaret," said my aunt Jane, decidedly. "It is ridiculous to think of a child like that going to a large ball!"

"Nonsense, sister; it will do her good. Let her have all the pleasure she can; it is little enough comes in her way!"

Dear aunt Patty! I knew my case was safe in her hands; so I did not venture to say a word, but sat in the deep window seat, half-hidden by the curtain, my lap full of roses, which I feigned to be busily arranging, but my nervous fingers trembled so that I could hardly hold the flowers.

I listened eagerly, breathlessly, for aunt Jane's decision. She spoke after a few moments' hesitation.

"You know, Patty, I am as anxious to give Margaret amusement as you can be, but we must not rashly indulge her in anything which might be harmful for her."

Then she turned to me suddenly.

"Is your heart set on this ball, Margaret?"

"Oh, aunt Jane, if only I might go!" I say, imploringly.

And I spring to my feet, letting the bright red and yellow roses fall unheeded to the ground, and throw my arms around her neck.

"There, there, child! how impulsive you are!" And she settled her cap straight, which I had disarranged in my embrace. "I don't see how it can be managed any way. Where on earth the dress would come from is more than I can tell; and I wouldn't have you look a fright!"

"A fright, indeed!" interrupted aunt Patty. "As though Maggie could ever look a fright! You write to Mrs. Glenmorris, Jane, accept for us all, and leave the dress to me."

I went over to her and took the stool at her feet, my favorite seat, and glided my hand into hers. She looked down at me, and gave it a gentle pressure. We understood each other so well, she and I.

These two good women had been everything to me since my parents died, when I was quite a tiny thing, and they had never let me feel the want of a mother's love.

Aunt Jane was over fifty, and far too sensible to try and appear younger than she was. A little stern, perhaps, at times, and not so apt to overlook my childish follies as aunt Patty, but never really unkind.

She was a handsome woman still; tall and erect, her gray hair braided smoothly beneath her cap, her bright brown eyes shining clearly from under a pair of dark, strongly-marked eyebrows.

I can never remember her in anything but gray. Aunt Jane's gray silk dress and soft lace kerchief seemed part of herself, and suited her as nothing else could have done.

Now, aunt Patty was very different in every way. She was many years younger, short and rather stout. Her hair was brown without a single line of white, and little rebellious curls broke out here and there, which could not be persuaded to lie smooth.

Always bright and gay, no one would guess the sad romance of her youth, which would have clouded, or even utterly crushed, a spirit any less truly noble than hers. She had had her sorrow and had bravely lived it down.

The note was written and sealed, and I ran up-stairs and put on my bat, so that I might post it myself. I should not feel quite safe until it had really gone. When I came down, aunt Patty was just finishing arranging the flowers, which I had forgotten.

"Oh, auntie, I am so sorry! Why didn't you leave them for me! The thought of the ball drove everything else out of my mind."

She only smiled and shook her head; but aunt Jane said, severely, "If the very anticipation makes you so forgetful, I fear the ball itself will do you no good."

I would not wait for more. What if, even now, my aunt should change her mind? I ran down-stairs, taking the last three steps at a jump, and was soon hurrying down the road to the village, my cheeks aglow, my heart beating high with delight.

How happy I was! I felt that I must sing out for very joyfulness. The warm June air was full of sweet sounds, a bluebird was pouring out a flood of melody high above my head, the bees were busy among the honeysuckle and wild roses in the hedges, and with all came the ceaseless murmur of the sea as the lazy wavelets softly lapped the shore. Now and again a muffled thunder told where the distant breakers rushed madly over the rocks, and dashed themselves with impotent fury against the cliffs.

How beautiful the sea looked, glittering in the sunshine as with a myriad of stars, and dotted here and there with a white sail, and one line of gray only dividing the blue of the ocean from the sky.

I felt rather than saw the beauty which surrounded me, for the coming ball occupied all my thoughts, and I made my way as fast as I could along the road which led to the village.

It was with a sigh of relief that I let the note slip from my fingers into the box, and turned to retrace my steps.

Coming toward me up the winding, irregular street, was Ned Bathurst, "Doctor Edward," as the village people called him, but he was always Ned to me, for I had known him ever since I was a spoilt, willful child of five, and he a great awkward youth of seventeen.

We had always been good friends, and had never had one serious quarrel. He was day-dreaming as usual, and did not hear me when I called to him; but I knew Ned's manner, so stood directly in his way on the narrow path.

He was getting to look dreadfully old, I thought, as I noted his rounded shoulders and somewhat careworn features. He worked too hard, I knew. Old Doctor Bathurst was growing feeble, and most of the work fell to Ned's share.

He did not look up till he was close by me. Then the grave visage lighted up with a smile—such a frank smile! It changed him in a moment, making the plain features look almost handsome.

"Why, Maggie, what has brought you to the village in this hot sun? You should have been among the cool breezes on the beach. What wouldn't I give to be there now, with nothing to do but to lie on my back on the firm, white sand, and gaze up at the blue sky above! I long for a taste of the fresh salt sea-weeds."

"Oh, Ned, do come now! It would be lovely to see you! Are you so very busy?"

I passed my hand through his arm, and looked up at him. I knew how hard he found it to refuse me anything. He hesitated. "I was going to see old Bessie."

"Then you must not," indignantly. "You know, Ned, you said you could do nothing for her rheumatism, and she is selfish to expect you to go and see her so often. Besides, I want to speak to you."

"Anything really important?" looking down at me with his kind, gray eyes.

"Yes, really; but I can't tell you here."

He stood for a moment irresolute; then, of course, I had my way, and we were soon walking on the beach, the firm, springy sand beneath our feet, and the cool breath of the sea fanning our cheeks.

"Now, child, for your news," he said; but I would tell him nothing till we had walked some distance; then I seated myself on a corner of a rock, and he threw himself at my feet.

"In the first place," I began, with dignity, "you must never call me 'child' again; even

aunt Jane has proved that she considers me quite grown up. Next week I am going to Mrs. Glenmorris's ball."

I looked to see the effect of my words. His dark brows contracted a little, and his look expressed weariness. I almost fancied that he sighed.

"Are you not glad?" I asked. "Why, it will be splendid!"

He recovered himself with an effort. "Glad, Maggie? Oh, yes; of course!"

But he did not seem at all pleased.

"I wish you had been asked, too," I went on, fancying I saw the reason of his coolness. Ned generally took so much interest in my pleasures. "Couldn't you manage to get an invitation, Ned?"

He drew a note from his pocket, and opening it, spread it out on my lap. I at once recognized the blue and silver monogram at the top of the page.

"You don't mean to say you actually have been asked, after all?" I cried, excitedly; "and you never said anything about it?"

He smiled at the reproach in my tone.

"Maggie, it makes no difference. You can't think I should go!"

"Why not?" But I looked at his ungainly figure with some misgivings, and my words did not sound hopeful. I fancied he read my thoughts, so made haste to make amends.

"Do come, Ned. I am sure you will enjoy it; and it would not be half the fun for me without you. Besides I shall hardly know a soul; so you must come and dance with me."

"Fancy me dancing!"—and he laughed out merrily. "Why, Maggie, you would have to teach me. I never tried to dance in my life."

"I would do my very best, Ned," I said, rather patronizingly, "but I only know what aunt Patty taught me. But, never mind, I believe it comes naturally when we hear the music."

"It might to you, Maggie; but I am such a great awkward fellow."

"Well, I will tell you how it shall be, if only you will write and accept. You can come in sometimes in the evening, and we will get aunt Patty to give us lessons."

"If I am to come this evening, then," he said, jumping to his feet, "I must be off, for I have ever so much to get through first. Will you come too?"

"Not just yet, Ned; it is so nice and cool here."

I watched him as he hurried off up toward the village, with great ungainly strides, his figure growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

Dear old Ned—how good he was! I knew if he went to the ball it would only be to please me; and yet—well, I hoped he would not be the only partner I should have. I already had visions of some one very different, though I had not quite made up my mind what he should be like. I was undecided as to whether he should be fair or dark. A tawny mustache had always greatly taken my fancy when I had read about it; but then I was not quite sure that I understood what "tawny" meant. Of course, he must be tall, and his eyes either black and fierce, or brown, with long lashes. I had never had a lover, though I was nearly seventeen. Perhaps I might see him at the ball.

So I stayed dreaming through the long afternoon, till, at last, beginning to feel hungry, I bethought me it must be getting near tea-time; so I left the cool shade of the rock and was soon hurrying across the stretch of yellow sand next ascending, but with slower steps, the steep hill.

When I came to the cottage, I paused before entering, for the sound of voices came to me through the open window.

I could see into the room from where I stood in the rose-covered porch, and caught a glimpse of a well-known brown bonnet. I knew that bonnet could belong only to Mrs. Lipscomb, our lawyer's wife, and she never called without telling us all the news of the neighborhood.

As I did not pretend to be above hearing a

little gossip, I hastened in, leaving my hat and gloves on the hall table as I passed.

"My dear, we were just talking about you," said our visitor, as I entered. "I saw you pass with young Doctor Bathurst."

"Yes," I said, taking a chair near the window; "he walked with me down to the beach."

She looked with a smile that was meant to be knowing at aunt Jane.

"Ah, well, the doctor is not so attentive to every one!"

I flushed up indignantly.

Surely Mrs. Lipscombe could not possibly mean to insinuate that there could be anything more than friendship between Ned and me? It was too absurd! How he would laugh at the idea!

I was about to make some hasty rejoinder, but her next remark stopped me.

"Of course, you know, Miss Macpherson, why Mrs. Glenmorris is giving this grand ball?" Then, as aunt Jane replied in the negative, "Well, you surprise me! I will tell you all about it, for I am sure"—with a sweeping glance that included us all—"that nothing that I say here is ever repeated. Perhaps you don't even know why Mrs. Glenmorris has been living abroad these last ten years? Poor, dear lady, she confided it all to me last Monday, when I went up to Gable Hall to mend some delicate lace for her—you know how intimate we are—indeed, as her companion before my marriage, we were almost like sisters. Well, as I said, I was sewing, and she was half reclining in that graceful, indolent way of hers on a couch near me. Presently she said, with a sigh, 'I do hope Talbot will settle down now in the old place. I trust the last of his wild oats have been sown!' Of course, I was very much surprised, for I never thought Mr. Talbot had been at all wild. And then she told me that she had been forced to go abroad to economize, for her son had been so very extravagant when at college, and had contracted such heavy debts (what with racing and betting, and goodness knows what besides), that the only way to save the estate had been to go away and live on next to nothing for a number of years. Next to nothing—think of that, my dears, with her luxurious habits! The Hon. John Glenmorris would never have done so much for his son if he had lived. Well, now, it appears Talbot is engaged, or as good as engaged, to his cousin, Miss Graham, who is now staying at the Hall with her mother. I did not see her, but I hear she is a great beauty and an heiress. So Mrs. Glenmorris hopes, when her son is married, he will live here quietly at Gable Hall, and go into politics, as his father did before him. Of course, for that reason, she is anxious he should be popular and on good terms with the neighbors; so, with that end in view, gives this great ball, and has invited everybody who is anybody at all to it. Indeed, I was able to be of some assistance to her by giving the names of people who ought to be asked, there have been so many changes since she was here. Dear me! is that really six o'clock? Mr. Lipscombe will be wanting his tea. I always do forget the time when I am here. Mr. Dana says, 'The Miss Macphersons are among the very few ladies who know how to converse,' and I am sure I agree with him. I have spent quite a pleasant afternoon. Good by! I will look in to-morrow, and get your opinion, Miss Patty, on that olive dress of mine!"

At last she was gone, and both my aunts gave a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER II.

A LOVE OF THE PAST.

NED came in just as Mary was folding up the cloth after tea. We were dreadfully unfashionable people—dined at one o'clock and had tea at six; and tea did not mean just a cup of tea and a biscuit, but a comfortable meal laid on a white cloth, whereon figured aunt Jane's formidable hissing urn and bright teapot, a crusty cottage loaf, toast and

a plain cake, varied by some preserves or a dish of fruit.

The fashionable afternoon tea one sees so much of nowadays is but a very poor imitation of the comfortable social meal I remember.

Ned helped me to push the round table into a corner, and put the chairs one on another close against the wall. I doubt if aunt Jane would have let any one else treat her furniture in so unceremonious a manner. But Ned was privileged; he was a great favorite with both my aunts, and had always done pretty much as he liked at the cottage.

We took our places for a quadrille, and moved through the first figure in solemn silence, only broken by aunt Patty's "Set to partners! Ladies' claim! Don't stamp so, Edward! Maggie, point your toes a little more!"

I burst out laughing after a time, it all struck me as being so ludicrous; aunt Jane, with a stern expression, gliding and courtesying with as much stateliness as if she were dancing a minuet; while aunt Patty held her dress with both hands daintily, doing her steps with care, and chasseeing energetically, her brown curls bobbing up and down at each movement.

"Margaret," said aunt Jane, severely, "I can see no cause for such merriment."

"I beg your pardon, auntie, but we all seem to be going through it with such great solemnity; I am afraid there is not much poetry in dancing when there is no music."

"We must master the prose before we begin the poetry," said aunt Patty; and we went on to the second figure.

"Now, aunt Jane," I said, when the quadrille was over, "do play a waltz, and let me practice that, too."

"My dear," she exclaimed, holding up her hands in horror, "I should hope you are not thinking of waltzing at the ball; I always considered it most improper. In my days it was taught sometimes in schools, and the young ladies danced together, but I should never have thought of letting a gentleman put his arm round me and whirl about with me in the way I hear young ladies do nowadays; it is neither graceful nor modest."

What could I say after that? I began to think that I should be condemned to dance nothing but square dances, just like any old lady; the ball had already lost half its attractions. I kept my eyes fixed on the carpet, for fear the tears should be seen that I knew had rushed to them.

"Do you think, Jane, that there would be any great objection to her dancing with Edward?"

It was aunt Patty who spoke, and a faint hope stole into my heart; it would be better to dance with him than to have to sit down.

Aunt Jane weighed the matter for some time in silence, and at last decided that, "Perhaps that might be permitted."

But what a waltz it was! Ned had about as much notion of it as a young elephant might be expected to have. After ten minutes of frightful exertion on his part, and vain efforts on mine to pull him round, we had to give it up.

"I am afraid," he said, with a smile which showed he was anything but dissatisfied with himself, "I didn't do it very well, after all—eh, Maggie?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, with as much cheerfulness as I could command, for my poor toes were aching frightfully, Ned's great feet having alighted on them more than once. "I dare say it's rather difficult to glide properly on carpet."

I almost laughed out again at the idea of Ned gliding under any circumstances.

"A messenger has come for Dr. Bathurst," said Mary.

"How tiresome," I cried. "I do think a doctor's the most disagreeable of all professions. You will stay for supper, Ned?"

"No, indeed; I must be off at once, thank you." And with a hasty "Good-night," he left us.

Aunt Patty was very silent during supper and appeared, for her, unusually thoughtful.

When the meal was over, and I had lighted my lamp, and was about to go to my room, she placed her arm around mine.

"If you are not very sleepy, dear, there is something I should like to show you to-night."

"I am not at all sleepy, aunt Patty, and it is only just ten o'clock."

I could see she was quite nervous, and her hand trembled on my arm as we went up-stairs together.

We entered her little bedroom, she closed the door behind us, and in silence placed the lights on the dressing-table; then turned to me with a slight laugh that was meant to be cheerful, but we were both conscious that it was a very poor attempt.

"Are you not at all anxious, Maggie, about what you are to wear at this wonderful ball?"

Certainly it had occupied my mind not a little; but I knew my aunts were not well off, and so I had said nothing about it.

"Not very, auntie; I knew you and aunt Jane would do the best you could for me."

"You are a good child," kissing me affectionately; "and the best I can do for you is this."

She knelt down, and unlocked a deep drawer at the bottom of her wardrobe. She removed carefully, and I thought almost with reverence, layer after layer of white tissue paper. When the last was laid aside, I could not repress a cry of delight. A white satin dress was disclosed—and such satin! its rich folds shining and shimmering in the candle-light, as aunt Patty laid it on the bed. Then I caught sight of a tiny bouquet of orange-blossoms, which nestled in the soft, creamy lace that crossed the bosom.

"Why, auntie, it is a wedding-dress!"

"Yes, dear," she answered, quietly. "I was to have worn it once, when I was a little older than you are now; but"—and I almost fancied it was a sob which caught her breath—"it was not wanted."

I felt that any sympathy would be unwelcome, so I turned again to the drawer, and there I saw a little wreath, also of orange-blossoms, and a lace veil; beside these a pair of small satin shoes, and some long white gloves.

"I think they will all fit you," said my aunt, coming toward me, and speaking in her usual tone. "You would hardly think—would you, dear?—that I was ever as slight as you are? Indeed, I am not sure that my waist would not have measured an inch less. You shall try these on to-morrow."

"Auntie, I could not wear them—indeed, I could not; it seems like desecration. My muslin will do well enough."

"Yes, Maggie—you must, to please me. I should not like it to be said that Miss Macpherson's niece was dressed unsuitably."

"Aunt Patty," I said, thoughtfully, passing my hand over the glossy surface of the satin, "why was it never wanted?"

"Would you like to hear, dear?"

"Very, very much, if it would not pain you to tell me."

"It will not pain me, dear, now. It all happened many years ago; and Time, though he does not always heal, softens the bitterness out of past sorrows. The moon will give us light enough to talk by."

"But, aunt Patty, I thought you never liked the moonlight?"

"You are right, dear; but to-night it will help me to tell my tale."

So I extinguished the lights, and we sat together in the deep, old-fashioned window-seat.

It was a sweet, peaceful night, the only sound which broke the solemn stillness being the distant murmur of the sea.

We looked for a time in silence on the moonlit landscape, then a cloud passed over the face of the moon, and we were for a moment in darkness.

Aunt Patty grasped my hand, with a cry of terror.

I threw my arms around her, and, when the soft light again returned, I saw that she was very pale.

"Maggie, it is nothing, child; only that sudden darkness brought it all so vividly before me. It was just that—a cloud for a time hiding the moon—that lost me my lover!"

After pausing for a moment to collect her thoughts, she spoke again.

"Maggie, when I was eighteen, I was engaged to be married. My father was against the match; and Jane, too, tried hard to make me change my mind, till she saw that I was determined, then she came over to my side.

"My betrothed was an Italian of noble birth. I met him first at the house of a mutual friend, who had made his acquaintance abroad, and had been so charmed with his courtly manners and many accomplishments, that he had invited the gentleman to visit him in Connecticut, where, you know, my dear, our home was also.

"Our mother had been dead some years, and I fancy our father found the responsibility of looking after us girls rather more than he could manage at times, for I was spoilt and willful then. At any rate, he found he could not hold his own at all against both Jane and me; and so, at last, he gave a reluctant consent to my marriage.

"Your father was already married, and living in California, and so he could not very well be consulted in the matter.

"Well, child, you may fancy I was happy enough then; and, as Raoul wished to return to Italy soon, it was agreed that we should be married with the least possible delay.

"What happy times those were! A river ran at the bottom of our garden, and Raoul used to come in his boat every day, and row back again at night. He had great taste, and helped me to choose the dresses and laces which were to form part of my wedding outfit.

"A few days before that appointed for our marriage, the wedding-dress was sent home. He insisted that I should try it on for him to see.

"I was proud and happy when I saw my reflection in a long mirror, for I was considered a beauty in those days, though you would hardly believe it now.

"You know my pearls, Maggie—my god-mother's legacy? I have shown them to you once or twice. They went well with the dress; I wound strings of them in my chestnut hair, and clasped others round my throat and arms.

"Raoul was in raptures. I thought he would never leave off admiring me; and, when he had said all he could about me, he fell to praising my pearls.

"'Why, Patty,' he said, taking off one of the bracelets, in order to examine it more closely, 'I had no idea you were such an heiress! Do you know that if we were to lose all our money by some unforeseen circumstance each one of these pearls would realize enough to keep us comfortably for a week?'

"We all laughed at his remark, and he got nicely teased for being so mercenary.

"How each word that he had uttered came back with terrible conviction a few days later!

"Some of the pearls were a little dulled by lying by, and Raoul proposed taking them to a well-known jeweler, living in the town a few miles off, in order to get them cleaned, so that they might look their best on my wedding-day.

"I packed them in a little leather jewel-box that night, and walked down to the boat-house with my lover to see him off.

"It was a bright moonlight night, so I did not mind having to return to the house alone.

"We were some time saying good-night, for I suppose we were no wiser than other young people; then Raoul took the box from my hands, and put it on one of the seats before him, saying, with a laugh, as he pushed the boat into deeper water, 'You are not afraid of

trusting them to me?' And I laughed back to him, and waved my handkerchief until a bend in the river hid him from my sight.

"Maggie, I never saw him again!

"I turned from the river, and walked slowly back to the house; when I had gone about half-way the moon suddenly passed behind a heavy cloud, making the night, all at once, so dark that it was with difficulty I reached home, having almost to feel my way before me.

Days, weeks passed, and Raoul never returned. No trace of him could be found. His friend proved that he never came back on the night that we last saw him.

"You can imagine my agony. I would have it that he was drowned, and Jane thought with me; but the river was dragged in several places, and his body was not discovered.

"I noticed by my father's grave and stern looks that he was keeping something from me. At last I learned that he believed Raoul—my own noble Raoul!—had stolen the pearls, and made his way back to Italy with them.

"Oh, it was hard to bear!—to hear him accused of so dishonorable an act, and not to be able to prove his innocence.

"I thought for some time that I should go mad; but, fortunately, through all my grief, I retained my senses.

"And so the years, as they went on, brought me peace, although my lips had lost their smile, and the color had faded from my cheeks; for how could I be happy when my lover's fate was still a mystery? I felt—I knew myself that he was dead; but how could I rest while others thought him guilty?

"Five long years dragged out their weary days, bringing with them many changes. Our father made some unfortunate speculations, and in a few months lost nearly all his property. He never recovered from the shock, and died before the end of the year. But little remained from the wreck; but it was sufficient for Jane and I. She felt she could not live, with our changed circumstances, in the old place, and so we came here and bought this little cottage.

"It was a great trial for me to leave our home; for I had always felt that one day Raoul's fate would be made known, and for months after we had left I pined and grieved in secret. But Jane discovered what was wrong with me, and insisted that I should accept an invitation which had been long standing from some old friends.

"I yielded, and was once more in the country so dear, and yet so sad, to me.

"My friends were very kind, doing all in their power to rouse me from my melancholy.

"I had kept away from the river, though repeatedly asked to go out boating.

"At last, when a water picnic was proposed, I did not like any longer to refuse. It was a merry party, and we passed a pleasant day enough. I strove to be cheerful, notwithstanding the dull pain that was ever at my heart.

"The sun was nearing the horizon when we turned toward home, and some ominous clouds overhead made us bend to our oars with a will in order to avoid the threatened storm.

"As an inducement to hurry back, some one proposed a race, and the idea was taken at once. The boat I was in had the best rowers, and we soon distanced our pursuers. A turn in the river hid them from our sight; we were so far ahead, had so decidedly won the race, that I suggested waiting until the others came up.

"'No, no,' said some one—I forget who. 'Suppose we pull into those high bushes and hide; it will be good fun to see them row quickly by, thinking we are still in advance!'

"It was no sooner said than done; the boat was driven among the highest brush, the foliage closing in after us and completely concealing us from view. Presently the other boat glided by, the rowers looking fagged and heated with their exertions, thereby causing great amusement to our party.

"When they were well out of sight, we set about extricating ourselves from the close-growing brushwood. This was not so easy a matter. One of the oarsmen had to stand up in order to push the boat out; in this position his head reached above the tall bushes.

"'Why, how strange!' he exclaimed, looking down at something a yard or so off. 'I declare, here is an old boat! I wonder how ever it got here?'

"In a moment I was by his side, clutching his arm with nervous, trembling fingers, and gazing before me with terror-stricken, dilated eyes.

"I knew it would be his boat I should see, and was not mistaken. I recognized it, notwithstanding that the paint had almost disappeared; and if I had wanted more convincing proof, there was the little leather box which contained my pearls still on the seat where had seen it placed.

"I do not know how my friends got me home, for I had fainted, and for some days was very ill.

"As soon as I was better, I insisted that they should tell me all; and then learnt that Raoul's body had been discovered beneath the boat.

"Oh, Maggie! to think that all the time he had been maligned and accused of such base actions, he was lying there, cold and dead among the river weeds!

"We could but guess how it had happened. I remembered the sudden darkness soon after we had parted on that fatal night, and did not doubt that it was then his boat had got entangled in some driftwood. Probably, in endeavoring to push the boat out, he had lost his balance.

"That is all, Maggie; it is a sad tale, but you see I can be cheerful, and even happy still. Yet, with all, I never forget; and some day shall see my dear one again."

For some time aunt Patty was silent, her hands clasped tightly together, and gazing out far beyond the silvery clouds, where my thoughts could not follow.

As the soft rays of the moon fell upon her upturned face, softening out the hard lines time had wrought, I thought that, even in youth, she could hardly have been more beautiful than I saw her then.

CHAPTER III.

I MEET MY IDEAL.

THE evening of the ball had come at last, though I thought it had been very long in arriving.

I was a good while over my toilet, for I enjoyed it very much. I do not think I was vain, but it was so seldom that I had really nice clothes. I fastened a large creamy rose among the soft lace on my bosom, and another nestled at the side of my hair, which I had arranged in a careless loose knot at the back of my head. My hair was, perhaps, my best point; and I was not a little proud of it, it was so thick and long, of a warm chestnut, without being even what my enemies could call red.

I stood contemplating myself in the glass of the wardrobe, feeling well-pleased with my appearance. The dress had been but little altered. My aunts saw, in some fashion book, that pointed bodices, short and narrow skirts, were quite the mode, and it seemed to answer in every particular. It did strike me as being a little too short, but then the silk stockings and satin slippers were so pretty.

Two hands were placed on my shoulder, turning me round from the glass, and I was before aunt Patty.

"Let me look at you, child." Then, after a moment's pause, she went on, with a sigh, "You want but one thing, Maggie, to make your toilet perfect. I have brought you my pearls."

She fastened the beautiful necklace around my throat, and clasped the bracelets over my long gloves.

Before I had time to see the effect, Mary ran up to say the conveyance was at the door. A

minute later we were driving toward Gable Hall, my heart beating high with anticipation, excitement, and nervousness. I hardly know which feeling was the strongest.

I turned quite giddy as we entered the large ball-room. Not many guests had arrived; but I fancied each and every one of them turned and looked at me as soon as were announced. Then I found I was shaking hands with Mrs. Glenmorris, and all at once became conscious that I was being addressed.

"You hardly remember me, Miss Marchmont. You were quite a tiny child when I saw you last."

I murmured something in reply, feeling dreadfully angry with myself for being so stupid.

My aunts were talking to a tall, dark, handsome man, seeming, for a moment, to have forgotten me.

I fancy Mrs. Glenmorris noticed my shyness, for she made me sit down beside her, and soon put me at my ease, so that I began to look about me.

Then a new fear took possession of me. I looked, first at one lady, then at another; a frightful conviction forcing itself upon me that my dress was not quite the thing, after all. What was it that made other people look so different? They had pointed bodices, so had I; their skirts were scanty too; but oh! so very unlike mine. Even the little slippers I had been so pleased with, I now felt were better out of sight, and tucked my feet back as far as I could under my chair. Other people's shoes had high heels, and were ornamented with straps or bows.

I would have given the world then to have been safely back in my own little room. But not much time was given to me to think; to my inexpressible relief I saw Ned making his way toward me.

"A quadrille is just forming, Maggie; shall we try it?" he said, as soon as he reached me. He was struggling with a refractory glove, which seemed determined not to go on.

I could not help noticing how red and coarse his hand looked against the light kid.

"Are you sure, Ned, that you could get through all the figures without making any mistake?" I asked, looking at him doubtfully.

"Margaret," aunt Jane interposed, before he could reply, "that is hardly polite of you. Go and dance with Edward at once, as he is kind enough to ask you."

And so I was obliged to take my place. Oh! how small and insignificant I felt, standing there by Ned's side, among people I did not know, even by sight, for the room seemed to be full of strangers, Mrs. Glenmorris having invited many friends from a distance.

Then the music struck up. Ned and I bowed idiotically to one another. So absurd to bow like that to Ned, as though we had just seen each other for the first time that evening. And were but very slightly acquainted. We were getting through the first figure pretty well, I thought; I was so busy doing my steps that I had no time to look round then. As I reached Ned again, after a ladies' chain, he whispered to me:

"Maggie, don't you think it would be better just to walk instead of troubling about steps? That is what the others seem to be doing."

And, to my horror, I saw that while I had been carefully chasseying in blissful unconsciousness, every one else was walking through the figures with a graceful, languid movement.

It wanted but that to entirely do away with the small amount of composure I had possessed till then.

I do not know to this day how that dreadful quadrille was finished; but at last it came to an end.

Ned would have had me walk once or twice round the room; but I longed to get away somewhere—anywhere, so that it might only be out of sight of those talking, laughing, beautifully-dressed people.

Ned seemed to understand me without any explanation. That was one good thing about

Ned—he always did so thoroughly understand me. Before I had had time to think where he was taking me, we were in a conservatory, surrounded by beautiful flowering plants.

The subdued light was a great relief after the dazzling glare of the room we had left, and the breath of a fountain cooled my heated brow.

"Now, Maggie, what is it?" asked Ned, after seating me on a rustic bench, half hidden by tall ferns, and placing himself beside me. "Why are you looking so unhappy?"

"Oh, Ned!" I said, clasping my hands and looking up at him with a deep sigh, "I do wish I had never come! Do you think you could find my aunts, and ask them if we might go home?"

"Indeed, Maggie, I don't think it could possibly be done. I promised Miss Macpherson I would look after you, and she has gone to the card-room with Miss Patty. I dare say they are now in the middle of a game of whist. I haven't the courage to break into that charmed, silent circle."

Then, as he saw how utterly dejected I looked, he said, earnestly:

"Is it anything I can do? You ought to be enjoying your first ball instead of looking so miserable, and, Maggie, it is not often that I pay you compliments, but I do really think that you look lovelier than any one else here to-night. Your dress is beautiful."

"Don't, Ned—please, don't talk of my unfortunate dress. It is that, for one thing, that worries me, only, of course, I wouldn't have aunt Patty know it for the world. Haven't you noticed how very different everybody else looks?"

"I should just think I have noticed it. No one else looks half so well."

I could get nothing else out of Ned. After all, it was comforting to think that he admired me, if nobody else did.

We sat out two or three dances in the conservatory, till I began to find it a little wearisome staying there with Ned, when all the time the music sounded so inviting; so when he suggested we should return to the ball-room, I rose at once.

"But not to dance, Ned. Mind, on no consideration shall I attempt to dance again."

Ned agreed that we would find some quiet corner where we could watch the others.

Things turned out very differently, though. Hardly had we entered the room when Mrs. Glenmorris approached, leaning on the arm of the good-looking man I had noticed soon after our arrival.

"My son, Mr. Talbot Glenmorris, Miss Marchmont."

We bowed; he gracefully—I, I fear, awkwardly, as usual.

He murmured something about the "next dance." The music began, and before I had had time to collect my senses sufficiently to think how I should refuse, Mr. Glenmorris's arm encircled my waist.

"Fast or slow, Miss Marchmont?" he asked, bending toward me.

"I—I don't know," I faltered. "Is it not a waltz?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" And he seemed to be greatly amused. "But there are two ways of dancing it, and I do not know which you prefer; but I shall soon see when we begin."

It seemed I was doomed to make stupid remarks or do awkward things that evening. I almost cried from sheer vexation, and for a time saw everything through a mist, while every light in the room appeared to be surrounded by a halo.

After we had taken a few turns, I all at once fell into my partner's step, or he into mine—the latter, in all probability. Anyway, I began to realize that waltzing was a very delightful thing.

"I believe you were making fun of me just now, Miss Marchmont, when you professed such ignorance. Seldom have I met with a better partner."

We had paused for a few minutes to rest.

I looked up at him shyly, thinking all the time how very handsome he was.

"Indeed, I know hardly anything of dancing. This is my first ball—almost the first time I have been out at all."

"And every thing seems to you delightful, of course?" he went on, with a sigh. "How very differently you will look upon balls and parties when you are a little older! You will laugh when I tell you what my feelings are generally on seeing a young girl at her first ball. I pity her. The more beautiful she is, the more enjoyment she derives, the more she excites my compassion."

"I should think your pity a little thrown away," I interrupted, smiling.

"Not at all! I dare say she often pities herself when she looks back after a few years have passed, and would give all she possesses to recall the light-heartedness, the capacity for enjoyment, the belief in the world, of which the world itself had robbed her. You see that lady bending her head over her bouquet, and seeming so little interested in what that fair, coquettish young man is saying to her? She would look just as wearied, just as languid, if he were making her an offer of marriage or confessing some hideous crime. You would hardly believe that ten years ago she was a charming, joyous, light-hearted girl, finding pleasure in everything? She and I were great chums as children. What pranks we used to be up to! Cora's ambition at one time was to ride her pony barebacked; and she did it, too, after one or two tumbles. We used to get up early, catch the pony in the meadow, and practice. I wonder what Miss Graham would say if she knew I was relating her childish escapades?"

"Miss Graham!" I exclaimed, in some astonishment. "Is it really of Miss Graham you have been talking?"

"Yes. Why not?" regarding me a little inquisitively.

"Oh, I don't know," I stammered; "but I fancied you spoke as though you were hardly friendly, when all the time—" I hesitated, then paused confused; at the same time the music ceased with a crash.

"We were talking when we should have been dancing, and now we can't dance when we would," said my partner, philosophically. "You must give me another waltz, Miss Marchmont."

He took my card and glanced over it. How I blushed when I remembered its blank page unsullied by a single pencil mark! However, he did not seem to notice it, but wrote down his name in two places; then, drawing my hand within his arm, led me to the conservatory, and placed me in the very seat I had left but a short time before.

"Now this is really nice," he said, "and you have plenty of time to finish the sentence you began a few minutes ago. You seem to think I ought to be on friendly terms with Miss Graham—why?"

Oh, dear! How embarrassing this was! What could I say! And how eagerly he seemed to be waiting for my answer! He had thrown one arm over the back of the seat behind me, and was leaning toward me, rather nearer than was necessary, I thought.

"I have understood that you and Miss Graham are engaged," I said, after a long pause, and when the silence was growing awkward.

"I thought as much; this is my mother's doings!"

He spoke more to himself than to me, and I could see that he was very angry.

"No, indeed," I hastened to interpose, "I heard it from Mrs. Lipscombe."

"It is just the same! I always hated that woman! Such an infer—I mean such a plaguey gossip! I never could make out why my mother puts up with her; but I believe she finds the woman useful in some way or other. Well, if ever you should hear either her or any one else coupling Miss Graham's name with mine, you have my full authority for saying there is no engagement between us."

I felt a little uncomfortable. Why should

he get so excited about the matter, I wondered. He seemed to read my thoughts, for he added: "You will think I am making a great fuss about it, but you can't think how I hate that people should gossip about my affairs, and Mrs. Lipscombe worked me enough mischief ten years ago, without beginning again now."

There was a long silence, for he was still brooding over what had been said, I could see, and I did not know what topic to start next.

Presently he turned toward me with a smile.

"And so you really thought I was engaged to Miss Graham? I can't help laughing at the idea. Imagine my being married to such an icicle as she is! No, my wife will be the very opposite to her in every respect. I should prefer a woman who had less worldliness and more heart; besides, I assure you, Miss Graham believes me to be a very black sheep!"

"But you are not?" I inquired, and then I blushed up to the roots of my hair, for unconsciously there was so much earnestness in my tone.

He laughed out frankly, "No, child; not worse than other men, I believe." Then more seriously, "I wonder if any one would care if I were good or bad? Would you? But how absurd I am! Why should you take any interest in me at all?—we have only known each other about an hour, though it seems to me as if we had been acquainted quite a long time."

His voice, always soft and musical, had sunk almost to a whisper, and I felt, though I did not raise my eyes, that his were regarding me fixedly. "Oh," I thought, "how wrong it is that any one should speak against him;" and I wondered if really no one cared about him; my heart was overflowing with compassion.

"Mr. Glenmorris, I do not believe you could be capable of doing anything really wrong."

For answer, he raised my hand to his lips.

"Is not every thing very quiet?" I asked, when I felt my cheeks had resumed their usual color. "I have not heard the music for some time."

"Miss Marchmont," he exclaimed, feigning great alarm, "I have a frightful conviction that everybody has gone in to supper! What shall we do?"

"Join them, I should think," I replied, laughing.

It was very easy to say that, but I found that one solitary couple, entering the supper-room long after everybody else attracted no little attention.

We were glad to sink at once into a couple of seats at a side-table. When I had recovered my composure sufficiently to look up, I saw that Miss Graham was seated opposite to us.

She raised her finely marked eyebrows in some surprise, while a scarcely perceptible sneer curled her lip.

"I thought you were to have taken in Madame Tysdale, Talbot."

"The fates willed it otherwise, fair cousin," he replied, lightly, though I saw his brow contracted suddenly, in some irritation. Then he half turned from her, and busied himself attending to my wants, and did not address his cousin again. Indeed, he made me feel a little nervous, for I fancied every one must notice how very attentive he was to me; yet all the time my heart was beating high with pleasure and excitement.

When the ladies rose to leave, he whispered in my ear: "Remember, you are engaged to me for the next dance."

Oh, how happy I was!

"I need not ask if you are enjoying yourself, my dear," said aunt Patty; "I can see it in your countenance."

"Oh, auntie, yes; it is delightful!"

"Where were you, Maggie, during the last three dances?" said Ned, coming up. "You know we arranged it to go to supper together, I looked for you everywhere. You must dance another quadrille with me to make up for your desertion."

I promised I would do so; I was ready to do

anything that was amiable in my then frame of mind.

But, after all, I did not dance with Ned, for partners were introduced to me one after another, and as he had not written down his name, I could not well keep a dance for him. I had two more waltzes with Mr. Glenmorris, two delightful, intoxicating waltzes, when I hardly felt the polished floor beneath my feet; and then we found out a retired corner, and sat out a square dance.

But all this could not last forever. My aunts waylaid me as we re-entered the ball-room.

It was half past two, and our carriage was waiting at the door.

"I shall call to-morrow," whispered my attendant, giving my hand a gentle pressure. He had insisted upon putting my wrap round me, and seeing me to the carriage. How handsome he looked as he stood there on the white steps, seeing us drive off, the moonbeams falling on his uncovered head.

"Ah," I thought, with a deep sigh, which was a thrill of happiness, "I have, indeed, met the ideal of whom I have sometimes dreamed."

My aunts kept up a most lively and animated conversation on our way home. I believe they had enjoyed the ball as much as any one.

"I really think that Maggie looked nicer than any of the young ladies present," aunt Patty said, glancing at me proudly. "I heard several people remark on the artistic style of her dress."

"I only hope, child, that your head will not be turned by all this excitement," aunt Jane interposed. "I am afraid it will unsettle you for everyday life for some time to come."

I paid but little attention to their words, for I was lost in a world of happy thoughts. I leaned back in a dark corner of the carriage, thinking over those delightful dances with Mr. Glenmorris. I closed my eyes, and called to mind his every look and word.

"I believe you were actually asleep, child!"

Aunt Patty bent forward, and laid a hand lightly on my arm as the carriage came to a sudden stand before our garden gate. We all got out and hurried up the little path.

Mary, who had insisted on sitting up for us, came and opened the door before we had had time to ring the bell. She had kept the fire alight in the kitchen, and had some hot coffee waiting for us. As it was rather chilly at that hour in the morning, we all sat down there and drank it.

It was four o'clock, and broad daylight, before I laid my head on a pillow; and even then I was for some time too excited to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

DUTY OR PLEASURE?

"I DECLARE," said aunt Patty, trying hurriedly to smooth those rebellious curls of hers into something like order, "here is Mr. Talbot Glenmorris. Come to inquire if we have recovered from the fatigue of yesterday, no doubt."

I had not expected him before the afternoon, so was just going off to the village to post a letter.

He did not stay more than ten minutes or so, and hardly addressed me once, but he made himself particularly agreeable to my aunts, who, I could see, were quite won over by him; and no wonder. Who could fail to like him? When he rose to go he turned to me.

"Were you going out, Miss Marchmont?"

"Only to the post-office," I said, as indifferently as I could, and somewhat coldly. I felt hurt that he had so ignored me.

"Then perhaps you will have no objection to my walking there with you?"

A smile was on my lips instantly, and my heart beat so that I could hardly reply.

"There, we have arranged that capitally," he said, as we walked together down the hill. "And now I have got a little plan which I hope you will accede to. What do you say to

a row this morning? Wouldn't it be delightful out there beyond the rocks?"

"Oh, yes!" I cried, clasping my hands in delight. "I do so love boating; and it is seldom Ned can spare time to go out with me."

"And who is Ned?" he asked, stooping down in order to get a good view of my features beneath my broad hat.

"Oh, Ned is only a friend," I answered, quite proud and flattered that the very mention of another man should make him look so gravely anxious.

"You are sure that he is only a friend?"

"Quite sure. Ned is Doctor Bathurst, you know. I have known him ever since I was quite a little girl."

"What, that great, awkward-looking fellow, with a freckled face?" And he laughed out gayly. "Well, I won't be jealous of him."

I laughed too, though I despised myself for doing so. Was it possible I was getting ashamed of dear old Ned?

I took my seat in the little boat with a light heart. The steady long strokes of Mr. Glenmorris's oars soon took us far from the shore. Then he paused for a moment, regarding me with a bright smile.

"It is too warm to row for long in this burning sun. What do you say to our going round St. Mary's Point and landing at the little cove? It would be delightfully cool beneath those beeches."

I consented recklessly, resolutely putting from me all thoughts of what my aunts would say. They would be soon sitting down to dinner, wondering what had become of me, for it was already nearly one o'clock, and it would be impossible for me to be home before late in the afternoon, if we did what Mr. Glenmorris suggested.

But, after all, it was worth risking their being just a little angry with me to be with him alone under the shady trees of St. Mary's Cove.

And I was supremely happy, reclining on the boat's cushions which he had brought ashore for me, drinking in the soft words spoken in his low, musical voice as he lay stretched on the ground at my feet, his chin resting on one hand, while he regarded me with his dangerously-handsome eyes.

"Margaret is a beautiful name," he said, dreamily. "It means a pearl, you know. How it suits you! I should like to call you Pearl, you are so like one, without the dazzling glitter of other jewels, but having the soft lights and shades of your own, far more lovely! May I call you Pearl? I should like you to be Pearl only to me. No one else calls you so?"

"No, no one else."

"Then you shall be Pearl to me!"

And was it fancy, or did I hear him murmur to himself, "*My Pearl!*"

Oh, could it be true that he really cared for me? He would not surely speak so if I were nothing to him.

I listened with bowed head and fingers lightly interlaced, gazing out over the blue waters.

Presently a boat came slowly round the point.

There were ladies in it, and as they approached I recognized them.

"Oh, Mr. Glenmorris," I cried, in dismay, "here are your mother and Miss Graham, and several gentlemen! I believe they are going to land here?"

I would have risen.

"Pray do not move," he said, smiling, and laying a hand lightly on my arm. "Supposing they do come, there is room enough for all. Indeed, now I think of it, my cousin did say something about coming here to-day, and doubtless thought me very rude for not offering to go with her; but you see she is at no loss for gentlemen to do her bidding. Such is the attraction of an heiress!"

And he laughed a little bitterly.

In the meantime the party had landed, and were coming toward us. I had thought that

Mrs. Glenmorris would not be pleased to find me alone with her son, but she gave no sign of displeasure as she took my hand.

"Quite a pleasant and unlooked-for addition to our party," she said, affably. "We are thinking of having luncheon here under the trees, Miss Marchmont; I hope you will join us."

I accepted at once, and before I had noticed that Talbot was saying something to the effect that it was getting time for us to return.

I would so much rather not have been obliged to join them, only I did not know how to refuse; and it did not make me more comfortable when I noticed how very cold and haughty Miss Graham's greeting had been.

"There!" said Mrs. Glenmorris, when a cloth had been spread in the shade, and the contents of a large hamper placed upon it—"this is charming! Now, Miss Marchmont, come and sit down between me and Talbot, and confess how you two young people happened to be here to-day."

"It is very simple, mother!" her son said, coming to my rescue. "I met Miss Marchmont, and persuaded her to come for a row with me. It was warm on the water and we put in here for a rest."

"You do look warm, certainly," she rejoined, glancing at my cheeks, which I felt to be burning, and from me to Miss Graham, who never under any circumstances seemed affected by the heat.

Throughout the whole meal Mrs. Glenmorris was most kind to me, indeed she hardly seemed to talk to any one else, and I soon felt so much at home there that I quite forgot my shabby dress and thick shoes. At first I had been dreadfully ashamed of them, for the toilettes worn by those two ladies were so fresh and handsome. True, Miss Graham's dress was only of lawn, but so fine and so beautifully embroidered, and trimmed with such delicate lace, that I all at once realized how beautiful a lawn dress could become in passing through the hands of a Parisienne dressmaker.

One glimpse of a tiny high-heeled boot, peeping out from beneath her white-frilled skirt, made me hastily cover my own clumsy shoes, and inwardly hope no one had remarked them.

I noticed that the cousins hardly exchanged a word, Miss Graham conversing exclusively with the gentlemen who had accompanied her and Mrs. Glenmorris.

Talbot talked to his mother and me for a time, and then relapsed into what, in any one else, I should have called a sulky silence.

"He is annoyed that we have not been left to ourselves," I thought; and so even his silence only made me glad.

"Do you think your aunts would spare you to us for a few days?"

Mrs. Glenmorris was saying to me. "We are arranging some *tableaux vivants* for next week, and should be delighted to have you to help us."

"Thank you; I should like it very much," I replied, quietly, looking down, that she might not see how very happy the invitation made me.

I did not know what *tableaux vivants* might be, but I knew that I should be under the same roof as Talbot—should see him every day, and constantly.

Oh, how bright the world had become to me all at once! I looked up shyly to see if there were any signs of pleasure on his face, and its dark and frowning expression rather startled me.

It changed at once, though, when he met my glance, and he smiled back at me brightly.

"Yes," he said, apparently rousing himself from some reverie with an effort, "that will be a very good arrangement; and, as I see Miss Marchmont has finished her luncheon, I will go home with her now, and get her aunts' consent to her coming to us to-morrow. I presume you will send the carriage, mother?"

"Certainly; what time would suit you, Miss Marchmont? Suppose we say four in the after-

noon? Then we can talk over the different characters at afternoon tea."

As Talbot and I were moving off, I overheard a few words which rather puzzled me. They were exchanged between Miss Graham and Mrs. Glenmorris.

"Aunt Carry, what made you do it?"

The tone was somewhat reproachful.

"Diplomacy, my love," was the reply.

That was all; yet the words kept repeating themselves to me as we rowed back. What did Mrs. Glenmorris mean by diplomacy? And did Miss Graham's remark relate to the invitation just given me?

"Why so silent, Pearl?"

Talbot's words roused me from my reverie. I started, and the color rushed to my brow at the new name, but I thought it sounded very pretty, as he said it.

"Tell me," he said, without waiting for my answer, "would it disappoint you if you did not come to the Hall? There, I see it would!" for I could not help the blank look which instantly came into my countenance.

"Mr. Glenmorris, would you rather I did not accept your mother's invitation?"

"No, no, child! I am only afraid lest you should not enjoy yourself with us. Well, you must promise, if things do not go quite smoothly while you are there, or if you should have any sort of annoyance, that you will come straight to me, and tell me about it. Is that a bargain, Pearl?"

"Oh, yes; but I expect nothing but pleasure."

"You will have no companion of your own age?"

"No; but I shall have you."

I spoke thoughtlessly, but the look with which he answered that made me feel ashamed of my words.

We found only aunt Patty in the parlor when we arrived at the cottage. I noticed how troubled she looked, and it was not on my account, for she did not appear to have been at all anxious about my absence. She hardly seemed to listen to Talbot when he explained how I had joined his mother's picnic party at St. Mary's Cove. When he gave Mrs. Glenmorris's invitation, she accepted it mechanically.

"Aunt Patty!" I cried, when the door closed behind him, "what is the matter? Have you heard any bad news?"

"Yes, Maggie; I have been greatly shocked. Old Doctor Bathurst is dead."

"Oh, auntie!—poor Ned!"

I was grieved, for Ned's sake, to hear of the old man's death, though personally it could affect me but little for Doctor Bathurst had kept much within doors, and we had seen but little of him; but I knew how greatly attached father and son had ever been.

"Where is aunt Jane?" I asked.

"She has gone to him, poor boy; he is in great trouble, and, Maggie, I could not speak of it just now before Mr. Glenmorris. It is all too sad to talk over with a stranger, but I think you will hardly care to go to the Hall now. Ned has been for so long one of us, that we can but share his grief."

We were both silent for some time; then I threw my arms round her neck.

"Dear auntie, do not think me unfeeling. I do, indeed, feel for Ned; but he himself would be the last to wish me to give up any pleasure for his sake. And, aunt Patty, I think I really ought not to refuse Mrs. Glenmorris's invitation."

For the very first time in my life, my aunt looked at me with cold surprise, and loosed my arms from about her neck.

"Is this my little, unselfish Maggie? Oh, child, what has changed you? I will not attempt to persuade you; you shall please yourself. You are old enough now to have your own way in a case like this."

I went to the window and sat down, doing fierce battle with myself. What should I do—go or stay?

It did not take me long to decide. I felt

how it would be all along. Duty on one side; Talbot on the other. Of course, Talbot won. I could not give up the visit. So much might come of it, though I hardly dared whisper to myself what my hopes were.

"Aunt Patty, I think I must go. Don't think worse of me than you can help."

"I don't think very badly of you, Maggie. Perhaps there is more in all this than I fancied? Child, is there any special attraction at the Hall? There, do not blush so. I think I can guess. Is it Mr. Glenmorris?"

For answer, I drew her head down to mine, and laid my tear-stained cheek against hers.

"You care for him, dear?"

"I—I think so, aunt Patty."

"But Maggie, you only saw him for the first time yesterday. I did not think our child would have been so easily won."

"Oh, auntie, please!"

She could not see my countenance; but my tone told her how she had grieved me.

"Well, well, child, I will never interfere with your happiness. Suppose we go to your room, and see what things you will want to take with you?"

It was with some misgivings I looked over my scanty wardrobe. It consisted only of three dresses: a clean lawn—the one I had on was not to be thought of for a moment—a gray cashmere, which somehow the village dressmaker had failed to make fit; and my best dress, a black silk, which had been aunt Patty's, and which was my abomination, it being scanty, short, and fearfully plain. It shone with a gloss which, alas! denoted wear—not richness.

I wished, as I gazed at it ruefully, that I had decided not to go; but I could not, for very shame's sake, draw back now on account of my dresses, seeing that I had not done so when my best friend was in trouble.

Either aunt Patty had smoothed things over for me, with regard to my visit to the Hall, or aunt Jane's thoughts were too much occupied with the sad event which had taken place that day to trouble about any other matters—for, to my great relief, the subject was not again alluded to.

I do not think I ever before felt so dissatisfied with myself as I did on that afternoon, sitting rather apart from my aunts, sewing a ruching in that ill-fitting gray dress. I glanced up every now and then, and noted, with a sigh, their sad, grave looks, and felt as though I were a traitor in their midst.

I knew that if I had gone up to them and confessed that I would rather stay at home, after all, it would have pleased them both. I was on the point of doing so more than once, but something would whisper in my heart that it was too late now—better to keep quiet, and let things take their course.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF MY SPHERE.

I HAD hoped that Talbot would come to call for me the next day; but when Mrs. Glenmorris's handsome bays stopped before the door, I saw that the carriage was empty.

I fancied the tall footman looked somewhat contemptuously at my old-fashioned little trunk, as he swung it beside the coachman's feet, and I am sure I myself felt very small and insignificant alone in that great close carriage.

"If only Mrs. Glenmorris had come herself in her pretty pony-carriage!" I thought, with a sigh.

Well, it was no good working myself into a nervous fit. I must make the best of it. So I tried to amuse myself by looking out of the window, soon, however, to draw back quickly out of sight; not that there was much to be alarmed at. We were only passing a little house with all the blinds drawn down; but tears came as I thought who was mourning there in bitter sorrow, and alone.

A party of ladies and gentlemen were playing lawn-tennis as I approached the Hall, and the quickened pulsation of my heart told me

that Talbot was there almost before I recognized him.

I wondered if everybody was outside, and there would be no one to receive me. It really began to look something like it.

A courtly old lady met me in the Hall, wearing a stiff black silk. I was almost going to make a low bow, but remembered, just in time, that she perhaps might be only the house-keeper.

Such proved to be the case. She came to deliver a message from Mrs. Glenmorris, to the effect that "Madam begged me to excuse her for not coming to receive me herself; but she was suffering from a bad headache, and intended keeping her room till dinner-time. She hoped, however, I should manage to amuse myself, and either join the lawn-tennis party or go to the drawing-room, where tea would be served at five."

A smart maid showed me to my room, and I followed her up the broad oak staircase, somewhat chilled by my reception, and wondering much how I should face all those strangers.

I decided at once that I could not go out alone to the lawn—the drawing-room would be preferable to that; and how devoutly I trusted Talbot would be the first to enter! Miss Graham, I felt, would not be my friend.

I wondered as I entered my room why such a large one had been allotted to me. Its very size was appalling.

It was handsomely furnished, and my slight figure, in its blue striped dress, was reflected over and over again in the numerous mirrors.

I saw armies of myself approaching, single file, up gilded corridors; hundreds of me disappearing down side-alleys, until they made my eyes ache trying to follow them. Then I seemed to pop out at myself suddenly, quite near again from beside a curtain. It was most embarrassing.

The maid assisted me to take off my hat and wrap; and then, kneeling down before my humble little trunk, which struck me as looking shabbier than ever in that grand room, asked me if I would give her the key, in order that she might unpack it, and lay out the dress I intended wearing that evening at dinner.

This was more than I was prepared for. I grew red with shame at the thought of my two poor frocks, so far inferior to what she herself wore.

I told her quietly that I would do what was necessary myself, and breathed more freely when the door closed behind her.

I took my dresses from the trunk and hung them in the wardrobe, passed the brush over my hair, and rallying all my courage, walked down-stairs with a firm step.

I paused for a moment, with my hand on the handle, before entering the drawing-room. What if should find no one there I knew?

My fears, however, were groundless; there was only one occupant, and he was Talbot.

I must have moved very quietly over the thick carpet, for he did not hear me until I was close by him.

He was standing in quite a dejected attitude. Hearing some one enter, he raised his head, and I saw that he looked grave and unhappy.

Had he some secret trouble? Oh, if I had but the right to share it, to offer him consolation! But, even as I looked, the expression changed.

Perhaps it was but my fancy, after all, for he rose to meet me with a smile.

"Why did you rush off so quickly, Pearl? I hastened in as soon as I saw the carriage pass. Have you seen my mother?"

"Not yet." And I explained that she had a headache, and would not come down until dinner-time.

His brow contracted in that quick, angry way of his.

"I wish I had known; I quite thought she was going in the carriage to call on you, until I saw you come alone. I should have gone myself otherwise."

Miss Graham then entered the room through the French window, followed by the three gentlemen I had met the day before at St. Mary's Cove. They were Mr. St. John, Mr. Trelawny, and Captain Cowper.

The last, I had noticed, paid Miss Graham a good deal of attention, which she appeared rather to suffer than encourage. She greeted me coldly, as usual; and the gentlemen, I fancied regarded me with some curiosity. I dare say my blue lawn dress did look a little out of place there.

They had all been introduced to me, the day before, but Mr. St. John was the only one who came forward to shake hands with me; the others contented themselves with stiffly bowing.

"I hope you are good at *tableaux*, Miss Marchmont," he said, sinking into a chair beside me. "We are sadly in want of help."

"Have you ever taken part in them?" asked Miss Graham, before I could answer.

"No, never; is it very difficult?"

She smiled a little contemptuously at my reply.

"Oh, no; not at all. One requires a little practice, of course, in order to keep perfectly still, and have a thorough command over one's features so as to get the required expression."

"Have you served a sufficient apprenticeship with the world, Miss Marchmont, to have your features and expression under such perfect control?"

Mr. Glenmorris spoke sarcastically.

"I fear I shall not be of much use," I murmured.

"Oh, I dare say we can find you some minor part," Miss Graham said, patronizingly, as she surveyed me languidly through her half-closed eyelids. "The Misses Logan will all want to take the chief characters, so it will be delightful to find some one willing to take the inferior ones."

"Which, of course, you have no idea of personating, Cora," said her cousin, almost rudely. "I am glad you give Miss Marchmont credit for being so very good-natured."

Miss Graham ignored his remark, and walked to the other end of the room, where she was soon followed by Captain Cowper.

Mr. Glenmorris looked after her with no very amiable expression. Her very indifference seemed to aggravate him. I wondered what it was made those two dislike each other so much.

"Am I too late for some tea?" said Mrs. Glenmorris, entering at that moment. Then, catching sight of me, she came forward and took my hand.

"I hope my son has looked after you in my absence?"

"I am afraid I have not done much, mother; but I am quite willing to make up for lost time. You have finished your tea, Miss Marchmont, what do you say to a stroll in the grounds before dinner? It is too warm to stay in-doors to-day?"

I rose with alacrity, delighted to get away from them all, and went up-stairs for my hat.

When I came down he was waiting for me in the hall.

"You would rather come out, Pearl, would you not?"

"Oh, yes; much rather."

"Well, we will go for a nice, long walk. Tell me, do you think you will ever feel at home with us?"

"I hardly know; it is so soon to judge."

But my voice did not sound very hopeful.

"What do you think of Miss Graham?"

He waited for my answer rather eagerly.

"She is very handsome," I said, hesitatingly.

"Oh, yes; I believe everybody agrees that Cora is good-looking—the beauty of a statue, I think, and with about as much warmth. She will be just like her mother when she is older."

"Is Mrs. Graham here at the Hall?"

"Yes, but she never appears until dinner-time. I believe myself that her complexion won't stand daylight. She is fearfully and

wonderfully made, and her talent for gossip is quite remarkable; even Mrs. Lipscombe's powers pale in comparison."

We left the house behind us, and entered a shady part of the lawn. It was very cool and pleasant there, for the sun could hardly penetrate the thick foliage.

After a time we found a soft, mossy bank, and sat down. A little stream ran at our feet, tumbling and tossing over the stones, which it had rounded and polished, the music of its waters sounding a sweet accompaniment to Talbot's voice—that voice I had learnt to love so well.

The time passed very quickly—so quickly, indeed, that before I had thought we had been there half an hour, it was time to return and dress for dinner.

"I want you to promise me something, Pearl. Have nothing to do with these *tableaux* Miss Graham is so anxious about."

"I should like nothing better," I answered; "but how can I refuse? You know Mrs. Glenmorris asked me particularly to assist in them."

"Oh, my mother has nothing to do with it; the management is entirely in Cora's hands, and I don't choose that she should simply make use of you."

Then he really was, at any rate, interested for me, I thought, and my heart beat high with hope.

"But you, Mr. Glenmorris—shall you take part in them?"

"Not I, child. It is sufficient for me that my cousin is getting them up. She and I are always opposed, you know. She never even condescended to ask me. I often wonder why she is here—how she endures my presence. She takes no pains to hide how disagreeable it is to her. What a comfort it is that the dislike is mutual!"

He laughed rather unpleasantly, and as though the comfort he derived was not very great after all.

I found I had but ten minutes to dress when we reached the house so hastened to my room at once.

I thought my black silk looked uglier than ever as I put it on; but I found that dear aunt Patty had put a handsome white lace scarf of hers in the box, and this I arranged so as to soften the stiff plain bodice.

A maid came, just as I was about going down, with some sprays of bright geranium. She brought no message; but I knew well that only one person in that house would think of sending them to me, and pressed my lips to them before fastening them in the lace. I found four strangers in the drawing-room, besides Mrs. Glenmorris and Talbot—one, an old lady, in a most elaborate evening costume.

I at once judged her to be Mrs. Graham. She wore a marvelous wig, composed of little gray curls piled one over the other; and her complexion was so singularly pink and white, that no one could fail at the first glance to discover how artificial it was.

She had a disagreeable, abrupt manner, and such wonderfully sharp eyes that nothing ever seemed to escape her observation.

The other three strangers were ladies also, so absurdly resembling each other that I never made out their separate identities all the time I was at Gable Hall.

They were sisters, apparently about thirty years of age, though I could not discover which was older or younger than the other, the daughters of Mr. Thomas Logan, the county justice, and rejoiced in the names of Letitia, Elizabeth, and Hester; but, as if not satisfied with being so much alike in person, they converted their names into something of a resemblance also, and were generally known as Hetty, Betty and Letty.

They all rose from the couch where they had been seated as Mrs. Glenmorris introduced me, and bowed exactly at the same time and in the same manner.

I took a chair near, and endeavored to enter into conversation with them; but I found that,

as soon as I addressed one, they all answered together, and generally with the same words. This amused me at first, but after a time grew so annoying that I was glad when dinner was announced.

Mr. St. John fell to my lot, and though I regretted not having Talbot, it was better than if either of the other gentlemen had been asked to take me in.

I am sure they were as glad of it as myself, for I knew they always regarded my presence as a great mistake, and I am not sure that they were wrong.

The dinner was an uninteresting affair enough, Mrs. Graham taking the chief part in the conversation, relating anecdotes and bits of scandal about people whom all present seemed to be pretty well acquainted with, but of whom I knew nothing whatever.

Her daughter ventured to contradict her once or twice, and suggested that it would be as well not to mention names until the story was more authenticated; but the old lady instantly brought forward such convincing proofs, and mentioned such very disgraceful facts, where before she had contented herself with hints, that Miss Graham very discreetly let her alone for the rest of dinner. It was high time; my ears already tingled with what I had heard, and I did not dare to look from my plate for some time. When I did so, however, and took a timid glance around, I found that no one else showed any confusion.

A very few days at the Hall served to convince me that topics were freely discussed by Mrs. Glenmorris and her guests, which my good aunts would blush to mention.

It shocked me a little to hear Talbot encourage his aunt in her extraordinary reminiscences for the benefit of the three Misses Logan, who tittered and giggled behind their fans, whispering now and again:

"Oh, fie, Mr. Talbot!"

"It is really too dreadful!"

"You make me blush!"

But I could not discover any trace of a blush on the cheeks of either of them.

"Now, my dear, I want you to come and sit by me," said Mrs. Graham to me, when we had retired to the drawing-room after dinner. "You are a stranger to me, and it is such a novelty to come across a new face. I thought I knew everybody. Where did you spring from, child?"

I longed to shake myself free from her grasp, for she had laid a bony hand upon my arm; but I felt that I could not, so I resigned myself to the inevitable, and suffered her to lead me to an ottoman, and to place herself beside me.

I had to answer many questions as to my relations; why I lived with my aunts, where my parents died, etc., etc. When I had satisfied her on these points, she said, abruptly, "And why has my sister-in-law invited you here?"

I was somewhat at a loss how to reply to this; it had puzzled me not a little myself.

"I suppose because she thought it would give me pleasure," I said, after a little hesitation.

At this she laughed a funny, cackling little laugh, and tapped me playfully with her fan.

"You poor dear! Don't believe it for a moment. Caroline never did a good-natured thing in her life. She has some motive, you may depend on it. Does she have all us here, and spend what little money she has not yet squandered in dinner parties, picnics, dances, and what not, for our pleasure? Not a bit of it, but to try and patch up a match between Talbot and Cora. She will meddle, though I tell her again and again that all will come right if she will but let them alone."

I thought I knew much better, but took care not to say so.

The sound of manly steps outside was a signal for the Misses Logan to begin a trio, and under cover of it Mrs. Graham instantly began to talk about them.

"Are they not too absurd?" she said, without

attempting to lower her voice. "Squeezing themselves before the piano like that, and did you ever see three people so terribly alike?"

"Not so very terrible, is it?" I asked, laughing.

"It has proved so, I can tell you. You could not imagine either of them getting engaged, my dear, could you?"

"I don't think I could, Mrs. Graham, without some one took the three of them."

This little remark procured me an approving smile, and another little tap of the fan.

"Well, one of them actually has been engaged, nevertheless. A curate had the bad luck to be appointed to their neighborhood some years ago; and as he was the fortunate possessor of a very comfortable income, independent of his salary, Mr. Logan pounced down upon him.

"Mrs. Logan treated him as her own son, and even on one occasion nursed him through the measles; the girls made much of him, embroidered slippers and smoking caps, though I never ascertained if the young man smoked.

"Well, he was not ungrateful; and the way in which the young ladies worked at the Sunday-schools, and spent their time in the dirty cottages belonging to his parish; the way in which they haunted disreputable localities, and encouraged the society of low people, led him to think he could not do better than marry one of them.

"Of course, my dear, you must understand this peculiar manner of amusing themselves was all done in the way of visiting the poor.

"One evil morning he sought Mr. Logan and demanded his daughter, he did not really care which, but Hetty was the youngest, and so he said Hetty.

"If it had only been Betty!" sighed the father; "but now I don't know what to say, for Mrs. Logan has determined that the eldest must be married first. Perhaps you wouldn't mind waiting?"

"But the young man thought he would rather not wait for such a remote contingency as the two daughters finding suitors. He had been offered a living, and he wanted a wife. He intimated that Miss Betty would be equally acceptable. So that young lady was summoned and Thomas blessed them both.

"All went well enough until about a week before the wedding, when the young man coming one day to visit his future bride, saw, or thought he saw, her gathering a bouquet in the garden. He had been permitted but few opportunities of being alone with her, and determined to profit by this occasion.

"Betty, from the library window, saw him clasp her sister Hetty to his arms, and press kisses on her lips.

"My dear, imagine the confusion! In vain the unfortunate curate insisted it was but a case of mistaken identity, and pleaded shortsightedness. His excuses were not listened to.

"Mr. Logan remembered that it was Hetty he had first asked for. He pointed with outraged dignity to the gate, supporting one fainting daughter on his arm, while the other clung hysterically to his neck.

"Since then the three Misses Logan have determined to live in single, or I should say treble, blessedness for the rest of their lives."

The last part of Mrs. Graham's story must have been distinctly audible in every part of the room, for the trio was over, having come to an abrupt termination with a final bang of the six hands all upon the piano at once.

"What an improbable story, aunt Graham! Wherever did you get hold of it?"

"Oh, you are there, are you, Talbot?" said the old lady, turning fiercely upon him.

"Where is Cora?"

"In the conservatory, I believe."

"Then tell her I want her! I won't have her made love to by that disreputable Captain Cowper!"

"You really must excuse me; I have no intention of interrupting them!" he answered, coldly, with a sneer he did not attempt to hide.

"Talbot," she said, growing red with anger, and showing how much too pink the rouge was, "you are a fool!"

"Thank you!"—bowing low before her.

"Would you like to abuse any more of us?"

"I can't say any worse than the truth of most of your mother's guests!"

I could not help thinking how much like an enraged turkey-cock she looked.

"Everybody knows that Captain Cowper ran away with little Mrs. Granger the season before last. I intend to ask him what he has done with her the very first opportunity I have. And Mr. Trelawny, who passes himself off as a bachelor, married his mother's maid, to my certain knowledge, years ago, and is ashamed to own her."

Mrs. Graham had spoken hurriedly, and paused for want of breath.

"Surely, my good aunt, you won't leave St. John out? You say nothing against him."

"Oh, poor fellow! No, I haven't anything against his character, only I would prefer, if possible, not being under the same roof with him. His father died in a lunatic asylum, and the whole family are more mad than March hares. There is no knowing when he may break out."

Something made me turn round, and there stood Mr. St. John close behind Mrs. Graham's chair.

He was white to the lips—indeed, looked so ghastly that I thought he was going to faint.

The next moment he left the room, and I never saw him again, for he quitted Gable Hall that same night.

For three days after this Mrs. Graham positively did not make one ill-natured remark, and we were all beginning to hope that she had profited by the mischief she had already done, when she broke out again worse than ever.

The next day was Sunday. Everybody came down to breakfast with a subdued air, as though expecting to have some trouble before the day was over.

The Misses Logan left the table early in order to don elaborate costumes; Captain Cowper and Mr. Trelawny slipped out of the room quietly, one after the other, and did not turn up again until dinner, which was early on that day (I believe myself they were afraid of being asked to accompany the ladies to church); Mrs. Glenmorris had her usual Sunday morning headache, and did not put in an appearance; consequently, Miss Graham, Talbot and I found ourselves alone.

"Are you coming to church this morning, Talbot?" asked his cousin, turning over the pages of an illustrated paper rather nervously, and without looking up.

"Do you wish me to go?" he inquired, quickly.

"That is not the question. You know that you ought to go, whatever my wishes may be in the matter."

"Ah, but you know how seldom I do what I ought. If you really wish me to go I will do so."

I thought she would have been pleased at his unusually amiable mood toward her, but she only answered haughtily, "I should be sorry to think you only went on my account."

Muttering something I did not hear, he strode angrily out of the room; and a few minutes after I saw him pass the window, followed by some half-dozen dogs.

When I turned to Miss Graham again, she was still bending over the newspaper.

I was just thinking how cold and proud she was, when, to my surprise, I saw a large tear fall upon the open page before her.

Feeling that she was one who would ill brook having others see her exhibit any signs of emotion, I stole up-stairs, and began dressing for church.

She looked just as usual when I came down some ten minutes later, and I thought that perhaps I had been mistaken, after all.

We were both rather silent, and had to walk quickly, for we were late.

Aunt Jane and aunt Patty were already in

our little pew when we entered, and made room for me to come and sit beside them.

It gave me a pang of reproach to see Doctor Bathurst's seat empty.

How little I had thought of Ned! Would he have so forgotten me?

I pause for a moment in the porch to whisper aunt Patty to give him my very, very best love, and then hurried after the Misses Logan and Miss Graham.

I never passed a more wearying day than that Sunday, and could not help regretting the quiet, sociable afternoons we generally had at the cottage, for Ned usually passed the greater part of that day with us.

The Misses Logan yawned and nodded over some books of sermons. Mrs. Graham chuckled over the slanders she had it in her mind to utter.

I listlessly turned over the pages of a book of beauty, wondering greatly how any one ever could have admired such die-away young ladies as those represented there.

Miss Graham did nothing, but sat, hour after hour, without stirring or making a remark, till her intense passiveness made me long to do something to rouse her.

I rather think the gentlemen played billiards for I am sure I heard the click of the balls every now and then.

We were a strangely assorted set of beings, yet we all agreed heartily in one thing, and that was intense and unfeigned delight when bedtime came.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE WOOING.

"HAVE you ever been on horseback, Miss Marchmont?" said Talbot to me the next morning. "We are thinking of getting up a riding-party to go up the beach."

"No; I have never ridden in my life," I answered, ruefully.

"What a pity!" said Miss Graham. "You will not like staying at home alone."

"But I had no intention that Miss Marchmont should stay at home. You would like to come, Pearl?"

His cousin looked up surprised, and I know the color rushed to my cheeks. It was the first time he had so addressed me before any one.

"I should like to go very much, Mr. Glenmorris, if it could be managed; but I fear it is impossible."

"Only leave it to me. I promise you it shall be managed somehow."

It was arranged, and very much to my satisfaction; for when I came down dressed, an hour later, I found Talbot's own dog-cart was at the door. He intended driving me himself.

Mrs. Glenmorris had come to see us start, and, I thought, did not appear over-pleased at the way things had been settled.

Miss Graham looked remarkably well on her spirited bay horse. I could not help admiring the graceful way in which she sat him—her fine figure set off to perfection in her tight-fitting habit. She soon trotted out of sight with Captain Cowper, the other three ladies having to content themselves with one cavalier.

"It is quite right that you and I should be together, Pearl," said Talbot, as we drove swiftly along the narrow lanes.

"Why?" I inquired, not understanding him.

"Oh, because we are both traitors to the cause of *tableaux vivants*, and Cora is very indignant!"

"You have told Miss Graham, then, that I would rather not take part in them? Is she angry?"

"Angry? I doubt if she would condescend to be angry with either of us; but I think, as there is to be a rehearsal to-morrow morning, you and I had better be out of the way. I propose that we go for another row. Will you come?"

"Oh, Mr. Glenmorris, it would be lovely!"

He smiled at my enthusiasm.

"You ought to be happy, child; it takes so

little to make you so. Any one would be a brute who caused you unnecessary sorrow."

"I don't think I have ever had any real sorrow," I said, softly. "I sometimes wonder if I am not too happy, and dread lest some great trouble should be in store for me in the future."

"Heaven forbid, Pearl! I cannot bear to hear you talk so."

He leant forward, and lightly laid his lips on my forehead. It was done so quietly, so naturally—more the kiss of a father than a lover—that I did not think of remonstrating.

Suddenly the horse pulled up short, with a jerk that threw me forward half out of my seat.

A procession was winding itself slowly down a side road, and coming toward us.

It was a funeral. The first carriage contained one solitary man as chief mourner. Too well I realized it all. Poor Ned following his father's body to the grave!

Oh, what would I not have given to get away!

The horse was restive—he would neither stand still nor pass. A man had to come forward and hold him.

Once Ned raised his head, and our looks met for a moment. A dull red spread itself slowly over his visage, and then faded away, leaving him white as a sheet.

Oh, what must he have thought of me, sitting there by Mr. Glenmorris, one of a party of pleasure, thinking, caring nothing about him and his grief! Perhaps, even, he had seen that kiss! I burst into tears.

"Thank goodness they have gone at last!" said Talbot. "Why, little woman, it has quite upset you!"

He took his own handkerchief, and would have wiped the tears from my cheeks, but I would not suffer him.

Mr. Glenmorris, I said, firmly, putting away his hand, "I cannot go on. It seems so shocking that I should be enjoying myself while Ned is so wretched. I should like to go back, please."

"What, really?"

"Yes, indeed; I should prefer it."

He was about to turn his horse's head.

"No, you mistake; I do not mean that you should return—it would look so strange to the others. Don't you see, I can cross this field and return by Green Lane; then I need not come across the rest of the party." For we had passed them some time before.

He paused a moment, irresolutely, and I took that opportunity to jump down from my high seat, and was over the bars and running along the little path before he could say anything to stop me. When I looked back at him over my shoulder, he kissed his hand to me, then went quickly on his way.

I was glad he did not seem very angry; but I must have done the same in any case.

I had no intention of going straight back to the Hall—there was something else I must do first. I left the field, and entered a short lane which communicated with the road leading to the village.

Doctor Bathurst's—or, I should say, Ned's—was the first house on the road, and I soon stood at the door, a little flushed and out of breath.

I was glad that the little street was unusually empty, doubtless because so many of the villagers were at the funeral. I was almost the only one, I thought, who had shown no sympathy with poor Ned. And my tears flowed once again.

The old housekeeper came to the door. She had evidently been having a "good cry," as she would have expressed it, when my knock interrupted her.

"Lord 'a' mercy, Miss Maggie!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands in astonishment; "whatever brought you here, and on this day of all others?"

The old woman had spoilt and petted me almost since I was a baby. Throwing my arms round her neck, I gave full vent to my grief.

"Oh, Nance, Nance, I hate myself! I did not think I could have been so wickedly selfish!"

And I told her how, while I was out driving, laughing, talking, thinking of nothing but my enjoyment, the funeral had passed.

"But, my dear," raising my head from her shoulder and looking at me with rather a puzzled expression, "I don't see why you have come to me."

"It is because I must see him, Nance—must be here when he returns, and ask him to forgive me—I cannot rest until I have shown him I am not quite heartless. Do you think he might be angry at finding me here?"

"I don't know, my child," and Nance passed her rough hand over the curls which clustered on my forehead. "I fancy there is nothing you could do would make him angry. He thinks too much of you, Miss Maggie; that's a fact."

"Oh, yes, Nance, I know," I answered, feeling very humble and penitent.

I almost wished she would scold me, for I knew I deserved anything she might say.

It was long before Ned returned. I had busied myself helping Nance to prepare his simple meal, and had laid the cloth myself in the little dining-room. I liked to think I was doing something for him, however little it might be.

Then I heard the latch raise and his step in the hall—not brisk and firm as usual; there was something in the weary tread that spoke of a heavy heart.

He gave a long-drawn sigh as he hung his hat, with its fold of crape, on the stand, and then entered the room.

"Maggie!"

Before he could say more, I had thrown myself into his arms—those arms which had ever been so ready to receive me in all my childish troubles.

I forgot that I was no longer a child, remembering nothing save that Ned, my more than brother, had found me heedless, unfeeling in his day of greatest grief.

"Oh, Ned!" I sobbed, "forgive me! Do not think that I am quite heartless!"

"Poor child, I would not have even the shadow of my trouble fall upon you! But I like to think, dear, that you have not quite forgotten me. It was kind of you to come here, Maggie."

Then, when he saw that I was calmer, he went on:

"Maggie, there is something I would ask you. You know there has never been any secrets between us two. I am so much older than you—almost like a—father. You won't mind my asking you about Mr. Glenmorris? I think I saw him kiss you in the dog-cart."

I felt that I was very red, and for a moment or two could not reply; but I knew he would be answered.

"Yes, Ned."

My voice was very low, but he heard it.

"Has he the right, dear? I mean, are you engaged to him?"

"Oh, Ned, no!" I hastened to say.

"But, Maggie, it is not right, child. You are so innocent, so trusting—what shall I say?"

"You dear old Ned, say nothing. It will all come right." And I smiled up at him through my blushes. "I must go back to the Hall now, or they will wonder what has become of me. And, Ned, mind you make a good dinner. Do not trouble about me. Think of yourself."

"It is of myself I am thinking!" I heard him mutter to himself as I left him; and glancing back, I saw he had thrown himself on the couch and buried his head in the cushions.

I stole away, closing the door softly, and feeling very sad.

I was in no humor for Mrs. Glenmorris's society, nor did I care to have to explain why I had returned so soon; so, arrived at the Hall, I went straight up to my own room.

The window commanded a view of the drive,

so I stood there, after I had taken off my hat, watching for the return of the riding party.

The dog-cart was the first to enter the lodge gates, and I perceived at once that Talbot was not alone. A lady was by his side, and, to my surprise, I saw, as they came nearer, that it was Miss Graham.

They had evidently been quarreling, as usual, for I could see Talbot's brows were knitted in anger, and her head was half-averted proudly, her lips tightly compressed.

She sprang to the ground before Talbot could offer her any assistance, and entered the house hurriedly.

"Did any accident happen to your horse?" I asked Miss Graham when we met in the drawing-room a little later. "I saw that you returned in the dog-cart."

"Nothing serious. He lost a shoe, and I thought it better to leave him at a farm instead of riding him back."

She spoke so coldly that I fancied I had in some way offended her.

Mrs. Glenmorris, too, was not so kind as usual. In the course of conversation, she said, "So these wonderful *tableaux* of Cora's come off the day after to-morrow. I suppose we must not expect your aunts to spare you to us after that day, Miss Marchmont?"

It was all spoken with a smile, and very pleasantly; but I quite understood that I was not expected to stay after the time mentioned, and that she would not be sorry when that day arrived.

And this was an unhappy day altogether. I was glad when it was over. Yet there was one ray of sunshine; it was when Talbot bade me good-night, saying, as he did so, "Remember our row to-morrow, Pearl."

I looked up with a glad smile; but before I could answer he was gone.

I could not understand him at all. He had almost avoided me since his return home, and I had felt wretched about it.

I was very foolish. Perhaps he had been thinking of me all the time.

I awoke the next morning with a consciousness that something pleasant was going to happen, even before I remembered about the promised row.

What if it were raining? The thought made me spring out of bed, part the curtains with eager hands, and look anxiously out of the window.

Such a glorious day! The sun making the dewdrops on the lawn sparkle like diamonds.

A haze was over the distant hills, which told that we should have heat.

I laughed a little glad laugh to myself as I thought of the happy time before me. I sung as I dressed. I tied a blue ribbon around my waist, and smiled at the good effect.

"You look radiant this morning, Miss Marchmont," said Captain Cowper, as I entered the breakfast-room.

Miss Graham looked up sharply at the remark, and faintly flushed.

Perhaps it was only fancy; but I thought Mrs. Glenmorris's looks rested for a moment on my blue ribbon, and noted it with dissatisfaction.

Did she suspect for whom I had endeavored to look my best?

Breakfast was over at last, and I put on my hat, and strolled out onto the lawn. I thought Talbot would join me, and was not mistaken.

"Is it too early to start yet, Pearl?"

"Not for me, Mr. Glenmorris; it will be ever so much pleasanter than if we wait until the day gets very warm."

"Well, come, then, child; let us be off before everybody comes and asks where we are going."

I desired nothing better; so we were soon hurrying down toward the beach, and a little later our boat was gliding smoothly over the blue waters, then clear and limpid.

Talbot was unusually silent.

I got a little piqued at last, when he had let some minutes pass without making any remark.

Turning my head away from him, I leant over the side, and let the water slip through my fingers.

Our little craft was lightly built for a sea-boat, and the fact of my leaning over made it tip so near the water, that Talbot called out to me in some alarm.

I laughed back at him a little rebelliously.

"What would you do, Mr. Glenmorris, if the boat overturned?"

"I should try to save you, Pearl," he said, earnestly. "It would be a long swim from here to the shore; but I would do more than that to save you. Do you know why I wished you to come out with me to-day? It is because there is something that I would ask you. Pearl, will you be my wife?"

It was a strange manner of proposal. He had still been rowing as he spoke, but rested on his oars then, and waited for my answer. Something had told me that such a question might be asked, and I had often repeated to myself different ways of answering it. It would have been easy enough to reply with his arms around me, or with my head on his shoulder; but sitting there, facing him, his look full upon me, and I could but blush and tremble.

"Have I startled you? Poor child! I never could do anything like other men. Nevertheless, I would have my answer, Pearl."

"I—I think I like you," I stammered out, feeling all the time how idiotic the remark was.

"Then it is 'yes,' dear?"

"Yes, Mr. Glenmorris."

"I will try to make you happy, Pearl!"

Then he took to his oars again, and rowed for some time more in silence.

I thought it was the very strangest wooing, he seemed so calm; but, of course, it was only his manner. He would not have proposed to me if he had not loved me.

"I shall be proud of my little wife," he said, presently. "You are very pretty, Pearl."

He hardly said it as if he were paying me a compliment, but it pleased me.

"Are you sure you will never be ashamed of me, Mr. Glenmorris?" You know sometimes I am so awkward, so—so unfashionable."

"That is just it," he interrupted. "It is because of your true simplicity, your little knowledge of the world, your faith in mankind, that I would make you my wife. I would not have you different."

It was rather an ordeal to enter the drawing-room when we returned. I knew that my new-found happiness was so plainly visible on my countenance.

I felt that Miss Graham read the truth at once by the quick look she gave us; but Talbot met her glance with one so haughtily defiant, that I wondered what it might mean.

We had agreed that nothing should be said about our engagement until I had returned to my aunt's. Talbot did not disguise that his mother would be at first much displeased, though he did not doubt she would welcome me as a daughter when she found her son was determined to make me his wife. I myself was not so sanguine.

"I thought you were going over to the farm this morning, Talbot?" said Mrs. Glenmorris, almost fretfully. "Mrs. Lipscombe said she saw timber being cut down there the other day, when she passed."

"And I should like to know, mother, what business is it of Mrs. Lipscombe's?"

"She knows I do not allow a single tree on the estate to be felled without my permission, and so, of course, knowing how careless you are, she mentioned it to me. Really, Talbot, I think you should inquire into it. I have no faith in that new manager of yours."

"Very well; I will ride over to-morrow."

We had planned to go for a long drive on the morrow, but this arrangement would put a stop to it.

"Never mind, Pearl," Talbot found occasion to whisper, leaning over the back of my chair; "we will go some other day. It is only postponed."

CHAPTER VII.

THE COST OF A FOLLY.

"I AM tired to death of these *tableaux*!" sighed Miss Graham.

She had been sewing pearls round the edge of a cap for Mary, Queen of Scots, and now threw the work carelessly from her.

"I wonder why I am taking so much trouble about them? They give me no pleasure, and only seem a bone of contention to every one else. Oh, I am tired—tired of everything!"

"You seem out of spirits to-day, Cora. Why not go for a walk by the sea? You will come back a different person."

"If only I could come back a different person, aunt—any one but myself!"

She spoke so bitterly, I looked at her in some surprise, and found her eyes were fixed upon me.

"What do you say to a walk, Miss Marchmont? Will you come with me? It may be cooler out there by the rocks; it is stifling here."

She rose as she spoke, and passed her hand over her brow with a gesture of indescribable weariness.

"I do not know what is the matter with me to-day," she went on, trying to smile. "If I believed in presentiments, I should think the shadow of some calamity was about me."

"I think you stay too much in the house," I said. "We will go out now, if you like."

"It is very good of you to come out with me, Miss Marchmont," she said, as we walked along the stretch of sand that led to the rocks. "I dare say you wondered that I should ask you to do so; I do not know that I should, only there is something I wish to say to you."

She threw back her head in the old haughty way as she spoke.

"What is it?" I asked, faintly.

I seemed to know intuitively that it would be something I should not like to hear.

"I will tell you when we get out to that furthest rock. It is not pleasant what I have to say, so I am in no hurry to begin. Besides, it is too warm to-day to talk while one is moving."

She was still silent, though, when we had reached the rock and had seated ourselves.

"Now, Miss Graham, please begin. If it is disagreeable, it will be better to get over it."

I tried to speak reassuringly, but felt nervous, for my heart told me all this had in some way to do with Talbot. I was not mistaken.

"You went out with Talbot alone yesterday morning, did you not? Did he propose to you?"

I grew hot with indignation.

"I do not acknowledge your right to question me, Miss Graham. Had you not better ask Mr. Glenmorris himself?"

"It is not necessary. I know he did propose to you—knew it directly you returned, looking so absurdly happy. Poor child!"—how galling was the contemptuous pity of her voice!—"do you think that he loves you?"

"I know he loves me," I replied, confidently.

"He told you so, perhaps?"

My heart sunk within me. It flashed upon me for the first time that he had not said so; and I remembered, with a bitter pang, his strangely cool manner. Still, I answered her defiantly:

"Mr. Glenmorris would hardly ask me to be his wife if he did not love me."

She laughed a short scornful laugh.

"How little you know of men! Love, indeed! It is little enough love has to do with marriage in these unromantic days. People marry for money, for position, out of pique, for pity sometimes. It is for these two last Talbot would marry you. He has no love to give."

"I—I do not understand," I faltered.

"No; but I have brought you here in order that I may explain it all to you. Listen! Ten years ago I was engaged to Talbot!"

She paused for a moment to note the effect of her words. She should have been satisfied, for I know I was white to the lips. I clasped my hands tightly over my heart to stay its wild beating. But she had no pity; she went on in the same hard voice:

"The wedding-day was fixed, the guests invited, when it came to my knowledge that my future husband was unworthy of me. I learnt, no matter how, that he gambled, betted—in fact, was guilty of most 'manly' vices. I think, perhaps, I could have forgiven him these, though it was hard to find one whom I had thought superior, only like other men; but that was not all. He was a coward, and I vowed never to be the wife of a coward."

"I do not believe it," I interrupted. "Talbot could not be guilty of a cowardly action."

"So I had thought in my foolish love of him; yet it was true. I will tell you how it happened."

"A factory on my father's property took fire; the flames were visible from the house, and we all went out on the terrace for a better view. Talbot was spending the evening with us, and I insisted that he should take me to the scene of the fire."

"When we arrived on the spot we saw that a large crowd had already collected, all shouting, suggesting, giving contrary orders, but no one doing anything to extinguish the fire."

"Has any one gone for the fire engine?" Talbot asked.

"Lor' bless you, sir," said an old man who stood near, "tain't no manner of use sending; the whole building would be burnt to the ground before we could get to the town."

"Suddenly the crowd divided, and a woman, wild with grief, made her way frantically toward us."

"I recognized her at once. She was a poor widow, who, in consideration of keeping some of the work-places clean, had been given a couple of rooms at the top of the factory."

"She was blackened by the smoke, and I noticed that her clothes were torn and burnt in several places."

"Mr. Glenmorris! Mr. Glenmorris!" she screamed, "save my child—my little child! They will not let me go and rescue him! He is there—there in the fire! Oh, for mercy's sake, save him!"

"It is too late, sir," said a bystander; "we would have tried if it had been possible. Nancy here had gone to the fair, and we thought the child was with her. It was too late to get to him when she came back alone, and we learnt that the poor lad was there."

"At that moment the child succeeded in opening the window. We could see him distinctly extending his little arms to the crowd below. I dare say he was praying them to come to him, but the angry roar of the devouring flames drowned his feeble voice."

"He was a handsome little fellow—some seven years old, perhaps. It was piteous to see his wild terror. One would think that such a mute appeal would move hearts of stone, and still no one stirred, no one volunteered to enter the building. True, some one had brought a ladder; but it did not reach to half the distance. I turned to my cousin excitedly."

"Talbot!" I cried, "you must try and save him! How can you stand there unmoved and see that child burnt to death?"

"He became very white as I spoke, but he remained motionless."

"Cora, to enter the factory now would be madness."

"I looked at him with all the scorn and contempt I felt, saying, 'I never knew before to-day that you were a coward. I would die sooner than become your wife.'"

"A few minutes later a fearful shriek came from the window above. The child's little arms were thrown up; and then the floor must have fallen in, for, with a wild fury, the flames came leaping through the window."

"I looked around in search of the poor mother."

"She had fainted, and a couple of women

were carrying her away from the frightful scene."

"For days I refused to see Talbot. He thought I had spoken in the excitement of the moment, never dreaming that I should keep to what I said."

"At last I granted him an interview; it was better we should understand each other at once."

"It was a very painful meeting to both of us. I insisted that I would never become his wife till he could prove to me, by doing some truly brave action, that he was really no coward."

"I suggested that he should enter the army, volunteer to join one of the regiments ordered south—for it was during the war. But he was as indignant, as proud as myself, and swore that I could never have loved him, or I would not wish him to risk his life. He absolutely refused to court danger for my sake."

"He left America with his mother soon after, and I did not see him again until a few months ago; but, you see, we are not much better friends than when we parted."

"But how can all this prove that he does not love me?" I asked. "Many men love twice; he was but a boy when he was engaged to you, and now he hates you."

"Hates me! He loves me—loves me! Do you hear? I saw it the moment we met after all those years. He is almost mad if another man does but speak to me. He did but make love to you at first to rouse my jealousy. My jealousy! I laugh when I think of it; as if I could be jealous, when I know all the time that his heart is wholly mine!"

"But you had cause," I sobbed, "for he did ask me to be his wife."

She looked down at me contemptuously.

"You will hardly marry him now, I think, when you know that he does not love you."

"I shall want more proof than this," I answered, hotly, "before I believe that he does not."

"Then what will you say when I tell you that the day I drove back with him in the dog-cart he again asked me to be his wife?"

She smiled as she saw the start I gave.

"It is quite true; and once more I refused—asked him, tauntingly, what brave action he had performed?"

I laid my throbbing temples against the hard rock, and sobbed as though my heart would break.

"Oh, why—why did he make me love him? It was cruel!"

"I don't suppose he thought about you at all at first," said Miss Graham when she had let me weep on for some time; "but he saw how truly you cared for him, and—"

"Oh, hush—pray hush—or I shall go mad! I can bear no more. Am I not sufficiently humiliated? If only I had never come to the Hall. I wonder why Mrs. Glenmorris asked me? I was happy enough before."

"It certainly was very unwise of my aunt to do so. She always overrated my attractions, and imagined, I believe, that you, being so different in every way to myself, would act as a foil. It was a very great mistake, for you are as great a beauty, in your way, as I am in mine."

She spoke as if simply stating a fact, apparently quite unconscious that there was anything at all vain in her remark. I suppose she had heard her beauty praised so often, that she thought less of it than other women might.

Suddenly she leapt to her feet with a cry, and gazed wildly around.

In a moment I realized our danger. The tide had advanced so rapidly while we were talking that but a small portion of the rock where we were seated remained dry. I was paralyzed with fear—too frightened to move or scream. I sat, with clasped hands, gazing, with a horrible fascination, at the sea. It was on all sides closing us in slowly, yet surely, inch by inch.

"We must endeavor to reach the shore while there is yet time," Miss Graham cried.

And she would have plunged into the water if I had not held her back.

"It is too late," I said. "Remember the high this rock stands above the sands."

She saw it would be vain to attempt to move; and, with a groan, sunk down again beside me.

We knew it was useless to cry for help. Not a soul was in sight. We could do nothing but stay there, and await our doom.

I think all feeling of rivalry and jealousy was over between us then. We kissed each other silently, and sat hand clasped in hand.

My looks were ever on the stretch of sand by which help, if any, would come.

Oh, with what joy at last I distinguished a solitary figure coming slowly down the beach. It was Talbot, and at sight of him what little calmness I had had forsook me.

I seized Miss Graham's arm convulsively, and pointed to the shore. Then we both called out together—shouted louder than ever before in all our lives. And he heard us, and waved his straw hat in reply. Then, hastily divesting himself of coat and boots, in a moment he was in the water.

Nearer and nearer he came, doing fierce battle with the waves.

As he approached a new fear came upon me, and I turned to look at my companion. I knew by the way she returned my glance that her thoughts were the same as mine.

"He can save but one," I said, in a hoarse whisper. "Which will it be?"

And I saw that her face, which was ghastly white before, became livid at my words.

"I cannot tell," she said, in an awe-stricken tone. "It is possible, after all, that he may care for you. Perhaps I have deceived myself."

With what joy her words thrilled me, even at that awful time—not so much at the thought that I might be rescued from a fearful death as at the possibility that he loved me.

"If I am left," she went on, speaking almost calmly with the intensity of her feelings—"if I am left, am drowned, tell him I have always loved him—always! My pride made me refuse to marry him, when once I had said I would not."

He was very near then—so near that we could see his eager, flushed countenance as he strained every nerve to reach us.

It was time, for the last wave had washed over our feet.

Then he was on the rock beside us; but it was not to me he extended his arms—not to me he spoke.

"Cora! Cora!" he cried, as he clasped her to his heart; "thank Heaven, dear love, I am in time to save you!"

She fell sobbing on his neck.

Then I knew, with a fearful chill at my heart, that he had never loved me; that he would rescue her and leave me there to drown. Yet I stayed motionless, uttering no word of complaint.

When I next looked up Talbot had taken a broad sash that Miss Graham had been wearing round her waist and had bound her to him.

They both stooped and kissed me reverently, as it was right they should one who, as it seemed, was so soon to die. Talbot held my passive hand in his for a moment.

"I dare not ask your forgiveness, Pearl—he began, his rich voice trembling with emotion."

But I interrupted him.

"No, Mr. Glenmorris; you could not help it, I suppose. Take my forgiveness, if it is of any worth; but there is no time now for words. God each moment makes the distance greater between us and the shore."

Even as I spoke a wave passed almost over us, and I had to cling to the rock. Then I heard a splash as they entered the water; but I was half blinded with the spray and could not see them.

With all my strength I grasped the rock till my fingers grew almost numb with the strain. I think my hold became almost mechanical at

last, for I fell into a sort of trance, and yet it did not relax.

It seemed to me that I had been hours crouching there, with the sea washing over me.

Sometimes I fancied a wave had carried me off, and I was floating on the surface of the water; then that I was already dead, and lying fathoms below on the smooth sand, or being tossed about by remorseless waves, or hurled against the beach. Then came consciousness, and I found myself still there in the same position.

The awful suspense became more than I could bear. My rigid fingers relaxed their hold at last, and I gave one despairing shriek at the thought that I must die. A moment passed, and yet another. Still the expected wave which would sweep me away into eternity came not.

I ventured to open my eyes. A cry of joy escaped me!

The sea lay several feet below me. *The tide had turned.* I was saved!

I clasped my bleeding hands in thankfulness, and rising to my knees, thanked Heaven for my deliverance.

A few minutes later I was splashing through the water toward the shore as fast as my cramped limbs could bear me. Once on dry land, I was forced to pause and rest. My knees trembled under me, so that I could hardly stand.

Some one was approaching quickly with drooping head. It was Ned. I called to him, and he looked up, surprised.

"You here, Maggie!" Then, as he caught sight of my dripping garments, and noted that I was white and trembling. "My child, what has happened?" and he put his arms tenderly around me.

"I was there, Ned," I answered, as well as my chattering teeth would let me, waving my hand toward the rock—"there, on that rock, with Miss Graham; and he—Talbot—came and saved her—and—left me!" I finished with an hysterical laugh, which sounded strange in my ears, like the laugh of some other person.

Ned looked very grave; and his looks rested on me with such great pity, that my laughter turned to tears, and I sobbed upon his shoulder.

"Oh, Ned, take me home—away from them all!"

Half supporting, half carrying me, at last we reached the cottage. He promised to tell my aunts everything. I had wished it so; then they would trouble me with no questions, I knew that. I went quietly up to my own little room, and, sinking wearily into a chair, looked around.

Was it possible that I was the same girl who had left it so short a time ago, so happy and so full of hopeful anticipation? I seemed to have lived a lifetime since last I had looked at myself in that little glass. I started as I saw the haggard, wretched visage which was reflected there.

"My darling!"

A pair of warm arms were thrown around me, and I was pressed to aunt Patty's motherly bosom. But she would waste no time in petting me. She moved about quietly, helping me to take off my wet things; and would not leave me until she had tucked me comfortably in my bed.

Oh! it was good to be there among the soft pillows. I lay, consciously of the luxury of perfect rest. Then, in a half-dreamy state, I saw my two aunts, as through a mist, stand beside my bed. Aunt Patty half raised me, and held some warm, pleasant drink to my lips, while aunt Jane wept and murmured fond and tender words. Then my eyes closed once more.

I have often wondered since how it was that I escaped having a serious illness after all I had gone through on that day; yet I was not ill, but languid with an indisposition to rise. I felt much as usual the next morning when aunt Patty came in with my breakfast.

"You see, dear," she said, trying to smile

brightly, "we are going to pet you to day, and not let you get up for some hours yet."

"But, indeed, aunt Patty, there is no need; I feel quite well."

"Nevertheless, we must obey orders, Maggie. Ned insisted that you were not to get up before he had seen how you were. He was here early this morning before you were awake. He has gone to see Mr. Glenmorris now, and then he will return."

I could see that she regretted the last remark as soon as she had made it.

"Mr. Glenmorris!" I cried. "What is the matter with him?"

"He hurt his head a little, dear, against the rocks."

"Miss Graham ought to be grateful to him," I rejoined, bitterly; "he risked much to save her."

"Oh, Maggie, don't you know?"

"What is it?" I exclaimed, excitedly. "He is not dead?"

"No, no, child; he is all right!"

"Then, dear auntie, tell me all. There is something you are keeping from me. I must know it."

"Perhaps it would be better, dear. You must hear it sooner or later. Mrs. Lipscombe gave me all the particulars last night. Two fishermen were passing along the beach yesterday, and saw Mr. Glenmorris in the water. His strength was fast failing him, and the waves threw him repeatedly against the rocks. They went to his rescue, and found a lady bound to him; with some difficulty they succeeded in bringing them to shore. Mr. Glenmorris was insensible, having received a severe cut on the forehead. It was long before they could disengage Miss Graham from him, for she had thrown her arms around his neck, and her fingers were tightly clasped; it was doubtless this which had nearly cost him his life. When at last they loosed her, and tenderly raised her head, it was a dead woman that they looked upon. Maggie, when I think that had he tried to save you, you would not, perhaps, have been with us now! Oh, my child, it would have been very hard to spare you."

I turned my head away and wept.

Aunt Patty waited for me to grow calmer, and then continued, softly: "They carried them both to the nearest cottage, and sent for Ned. It was some time before he succeeded in restoring Mr. Glenmorris to consciousness, and when at last the poor young man did look about him he saw the first object was the body of his cousin. She lay there, looking like a beautiful marble statue, a smile upon her lips, her magnificent black hair falling around her, the haughty look she had so often worn in life replaced by a holy calm. The cottage had but one room, and there was nowhere else to take her. They say his grief was fearful to see; it seemed as though for a time he was bereft of reason. I suppose that this was how it happened that he had not mentioned that you had been left upon the rock, and so Ned was unconscious of your danger when he met you on his way home, after having done all he could for Mr. Glenmorris. There, dear, I have told you all, and now I will leave you for a time, and, Maggie, try not to brood over it more than you can help."

CHAPTER VIII.

MY FIRST LOVE AND MY LAST.

SOME weeks had passed since that dreadful day when poor Miss Graham was drowned. I had heard Talbot was almost well again, but had not seen him. Mrs. Glenmorris had called twice, and each time I had avoided her.

I seldom went further than our little garden, for I had a dread of coming across any one from the Hall.

Oh, what would not I have given then to go right away from every one with my two good aunts—and perhaps Ned!

Poor fellow! he had been so kind and thoughtful, coming in whenever he could spare

time, and doing what he could to rouse me from the somewhat melancholy state into which I had fallen.

I was sitting under the great elm tree, trying to read, but my thoughts were not with the book—it had been open at the same page for a long time.

"Dreaming as usual, Maggie?" said a sad voice beside me.

Looking up, I met Ned's look fixed mournfully upon me.

"Oh, Ned, I wish you would not look so solemn," I exclaimed, rather pettishly. "You always make me think you are coming to tell me some bad news."

He sat down on the rustic seat beside me, and nervously smoothed the band of his hat.

"I have some news to tell you to-day, Maggie; but I hardly know whether you will consider it bad news."

Then he paused, as if to summon courage to proceed.

"I am going away."

"Going away!" I echoed. "Oh, Ned, not for long?"

He smiled a little dismally.

"Yes; I think it is better. I have sold my practice here, and—and I start to-morrow."

"And you never said anything about it!"

I was indignant. There was more anger than sorrow in my voice. I was hurt—grieved—that he seemed to think so little of leaving me, and pride kept back the tears which otherwise I should have shed.

"And may I ask where you are going?"

He flushed a dusky red at the coldness of my words, and I was glad that they had the power to wound him.

"To England. I am going as surgeon on board the *Excelsior*."

"And when shall you return, Ned?"

My voice was under admirable control.

"In about twelve months, or less; but I hardly think I shall care to make this place my home. I shall try and get a practice in Boston."

"I think you are right. There is nothing to keep you here. Your talents will be better appreciated in a larger place. Did you come to say good-by?"

"Yes; I start early to-morrow morning."

I laid my hand in his, but I could not venture to look at him, for the tears would not be kept back then.

"Maggie," he cried, with almost a sob, "I cannot part from you like this!"

And throwing his arms round me, he clasped me to his breast, and kissed me again and again.

Then, before I had recovered from my surprise, he was gone!

Well, I could not call him back. He was a little sorry to part from me, of course—that was only natural after our having known each other so long; but, if he had really cared, why was he going? It was his own doing.

So I stayed there, nursing my anger against him, and telling myself over and over again that he was not worth grieving after, as he cared so little to leave us; and yet all the time I was crying softly to myself.

Aunt Jane came out presently, and I saw by her countenance there was something more in store for me.

I wondered what fresh trouble was coming.

"Oh, aunt Jane," I cried, when she was near, "if you have any more bad news, don't tell it yet—I don't think I could bear it!"

"Poor child!" There was more affection in her tone than usual; she had been very tender with me of late. "You have seen Ned; I knew you would grieve to lose him; but I did not come here to speak of him. Maggie, Mr. Glenmorris is in the parlor; he wishes to see you. I told him I thought it was best not, but he insisted that I should come and ask you yourself; he says he will not keep you a minute, but that he cannot go away without a word."

"Then he is going away, too?"

"Yes; he thinks of traveling abroad for a

time. Shall I tell him you would rather be spared an interview, dear?"

"Oh, no, aunt Jane," I answered, wearily.

"I think I had better see him."

"Shall I come with you, my child?"

"No; I will go alone."

It was with some misgivings that I walked toward the house, and I had to summon up all my courage before entering the parlor.

I surprised myself by the calm way in which I was able to address him.

"I hope you are better, Mr. Glenmorris?"

"Oh, yes," he answered carelessly, as though his health was a thing of no account; "I am all right, thank you. Miss Marchmont, I leave here in a day or two; I could not go without seeing you."

He spoke hurriedly and nervously, and then paused, as if waiting for me to speak; then, as I did not do so, "Oh, Pearl, I came to ask your forgiveness! You gave it me that day on the rock, when death seemed so near to you. But can you say now truly, 'Talbot, I forgive you,' with probably a long life before you which, I fear, I have helped to imbitter?"

I was greatly moved at his words, and placed my hand frankly in the one he held toward me so imploringly.

"Talbot, I can say it—more truly now than then—I do forgive you!"

"It is more than I deserve, Pearl," he continued, mournfully. "Your forgiveness will take one heavy load from off my heart. Ah, I have been terribly punished!"

He was affected to tears as he spoke.

With one long pressure of the hand, he left me.

I hardly know how I got through the weary weeks that followed. I missed Ned more than I had imagined possible. Every hour of the day he was in my thoughts.

Aunt Patty received a letter from Liverpool, saying he had arrived. How eagerly I listened as she read it to us, hoping to hear some mention of me, but my name did not appear until the end—"Give Maggie my love;" that was all.

I was hurt that he should have written to aunt Patty and not to me, and so I would not send a message when she answered it. I managed to secure the letter, though, and read it over and over again, until I knew every word by heart.

In those days I thought myself as miserable as it was possible any woman could be, and yet there was trouble still to come which made what had gone before seem almost light by comparison.

But first came the news that Ned was coming home, returning by the same vessel in which he had gone out; and I went about the house with a lighter heart, for he had said he would run down and visit us all before settling in Boston.

Oh, how I longed to see him again! I began to count the days which must pass; it wanted but one week before he should arrive. Aunt Jane was looking over the paper at breakfast time, reading out little bits here and there which she thought might interest us.

All at once she let it fall from her hands and turned white. Full of concern, we both ran to her assistance.

"My poor boy!—my poor Ned!" was all she could say in answer to our inquiries.

With trembling hands I picked up the newspaper she had let fall. The first announcement filled me with a fearful dread.

"Loss of the *Excelsior*!" I hardly glanced at the long account that followed, but eagerly read the list containing the names of those saved from the wreck.

Ned's name was not one among them. But almost the first was one which I then scarcely noticed, though once it had had power to set my heart beating fast. It was that of Talbot Glenmorris.

They had then, been returning home together. He had been saved, while Ned, my dear Ned, was drowned. I should never see him more, my faithful friend and companion,

and my last words to him had been cold and constrained.

"Ned lost!" I said the words again and again mechanically to myself, but I could not realize the truth. I neither screamed nor fainted; I could not even weep; but all the sunshine, at that moment, seemed to have faded out of my life.

There must have been something in the blank despair in my looks that frightened my aunts, for they forgot their own grief in trying to comfort me.

"My darling, do not look like that!" said aunt Patty. "I know what you feel, dear; you think that you are in some way to blame because it was on your account poor Ned went away. But, Maggie, it would have been far worse if you had married him, having no love to give him."

I seized her arm and looked at her wildly, questioningly.

"What do you mean?" I cried shrilly. "I do not understand. Ned never told me that he loved me. I did not send him away. Oh, aunt Patty, for pity's sake, explain."

"Surely, child you knew that Ned always loved you—always hoped that some day you would be his wife? It was not until Mr. Glenmorris came that he felt there was no hope for him, and so went away, for he could not bear to see you every day and be nothing more than a friend to you. Oh, Maggie, if only you had been able to love him a little! But you were not to blame; we cannot give our hearts just where we would, and you—"

I heard no more; the room swam round me! Was it my voice that cried out, in wild despairing accent: "Too late! Oh, my love, if I had but known! But now it is too late—too late!"

The ground seemed to give way beneath my feet. I fell forward heavily.

Whose voice was it I heard, even before I had entirely recovered consciousness? Surely it was strangely familiar to me!

I opened my eyes languidly.

Talbot was bending over me, and was chafing one of my hands between his own.

Both my aunts had left the room, doubtless thinking that we would rather be alone. Oh, why would they not understand?

I snatched my hand away indignantly. Half raising myself from the couch on which I had been placed, I regarded him angrily.

What right had he to come there taking my hand and looking at me in that almost tender way?

But suddenly I remembered that perhaps he had come to speak to me of Ned, and my manner changed. I seized his arm eagerly.

"You come to tell me of Ned, Mr. Glenmorris? Oh, tell me that he is not dead—that it was a mistake, and that I shall see him again!"

I hardly knew what I said, my words were almost incoherent.

He passed his hand over my brows, smoothing back the curls in the old caressing manner before answering, but I turned impatiently away.

"Speak!" I cried, imperatively; but I knew he had nothing to say that I should care to hear. Already the faint spark of hope which had glimmered for a second had died out.

"My poor child, I bring no good news. Pearl, I have come to ask you a strange question, and before I ask it I feel that it is useless. Poor Ned Bathurst, perhaps he was wrong, but he fancied that—that you still cared for me." (He blushed and looked awkward as he said so, but the words brought no color to my cheeks.)

"And, oh, Maggie, if anything could bring me happiness now it would be having you for my wife! Child, believe me I do not say this only because he desired it; you are very dear to me, and I should think the rest of my life not quite useless if I could devote it to making you happy!"

"But you do not love me, Talbot!"

"Not, perhaps, as I loved *her*," he said, dreamily, with a far-away look which told me

that for the time I was forgotten; "but better than I could ever love any other woman."

I held out my hand and he took it passively.

"I am glad—glad that you do not love me, for I could never have been your wife."

He did not seem surprised at my words, but drew a deep, weary sigh.

"You loved him, Pearl—Doctor Bathurst?"

I bowed my head in reply. I could not speak, and he went on, softly, "I thought once that perhaps it was so, and fancied that eventually you would have been his wife. Oh, child, child, we both have sorrows; could we not comfort each other?"

"As friends, Mr. Glenmorris. Believe me, it is best so."

We were both silent for some time, busy with our thoughts.

"You were with him," I said presently: "tell me how you saw him last."

He shuddered, and was silent for several moments, and when he again spoke it was with an effort.

"Pearl, I shall never forget the scene; it has haunted me day and night since. The vessel was slowly sinking; she had sprung a leak, and we knew that she must go down. I was in the last boat; the waves were high; and for some time we thought there was small hope for our lives; then I turned and looked toward the ship where she stood out black against the sky. It was night, but there was a moon which looked down calmly on the scene, pouring her silver light upon the angry sea, and shining on the deck of the doomed vessel where *he* stood—Ned Bathurst. Pearl, I used to think the doctor a plain man, but there was something so grandly noble, so truly courageous in the calm resignation of his look as he stood there, with bowed head, and his arms folded across his breast, that the beauty of his countenance seemed almost holy."

I looked at him with a shudder, and felt for him a kind of loathing.

"And you left him, left him there to die alone?"

He bowed his head once more, and turned aside, while his body was convulsed with sobs—deep, agonized sobs, that shook his frame; but I had no mercy.

"Talbot, you must speak! How was it so many were saved, and he left on the sinking ship?"

When he looked up I could not help starting at the change which had come over him. His voice was feeble as though he had gone through some fearful struggle since he had last spoken.

"I never thought to tell you all, Pearl; but it can make no difference now. Perhaps it is right that you should know. Do not hate me—do not turn from me. He gave his life for mine. Oh, Maggie, have some pity! Do not look at me like that! Think how hard it is for me to tell you this!"

"Let me hear all!" I said, in a hard, cold voice.

He forced himself to do my bidding, though each word was torture to him.

"It happened thus: When we knew that the vessel must sink, the boats were speedily filled. We worked together, he and I. We had grown to understand and like each other during the voyage. We saw the women and children safe first; then the married men; then it came to the last boat. Several sailors leaped into it, and there were only three of us left—the captain, Doctor Bathurst and I—and there was room for only one! The captain, he was a brave man and knew his duty. He would not leave the ship, as all could not be saved, and turned away without a word, and left us two standing there together. Then the sailors called out, almost with one voice: 'The Doctor!—there is room for him! Make haste, or it will be too late!'"

"His kindly, genial nature had won him friends among them. I urged him to lose no time, but he would not go."

"Maggie loves you," he said. "It is your life she will value most. Go, make her happy, and my death will not have been in vain."

"Vainly I remonstrated; he was determined.

"The men were impatient; soon it would be too late. It was worse than useless that we both should die, and so I left him."

It is Ned's birthday. I have been ill, and am still very weak, but I must try and get as far as the little cemetery, and place the wreath of flowers I have been weaving on the marble cross my aunts have erected to his memory. My steps are slow and feeble; I have to pause now and again to take breath.

When at last I am among the white tombstones, I make my way to the one I know so well, and, sinking down wearily beside it, lay my forehead against the cold marble.

The tears force themselves from beneath my closed eyelids as my thoughts revert to the past—not to that mad, mistaken time when I fancied that I loved Talbot Glenmorris—his image, even, is almost effaced from my memory now; but to the old days. Alas! those happy days, gone never more to return, when Ned and I were so much together! I do not know how long I must have been here; but presently I opened my eyes with a shiver. The sun has already sunk below the horizon, and the evening is growing chill. The clouds in the west, which had been so rich with golden light, are now rolling across the sky in solid, blue-black masses. The tombstones stand out, gray and cold, with black, unknown shadows lying beside them.

Something, that was not there before, is near me. It bears Ned's form; it extends its arms toward me.

I am conscious of no fear, only of intense awe. I rise to my feet my cramped limbs can scarce support me; but I stagger forward.

"Ned, you have come at last—at last! My prayers have reached you! I am ready, dear love! Take me with you!"

But it is no phantom form that clasps me, half-fainting, to its breast; and it is Ned's own rich voice that murmurs soft, soothing words in my ear. I feel his heart beat against my side, and the kisses are very real that he presses to my lips.

All the pain, the trouble, the weary days of waiting, were worth the rapture of this moment.

I lie passively in his arms, drinking in the sound of that dear voice, which I had thought never to hear again.

Oh, the happiness of being together again! Surely, none could love as we do who had suffered less than we had!

We forget the gathering darkness, and the good aunts waiting our return so eagerly, for Ned had already been to the cottage, and they had sent him here to find me. How they had welcomed, rejoiced, and even wept over him!

As we turn our steps at last toward home, I make him tell me all he has gone through since he was seen on the wreck.

His words made me tremble, I had been so near losing him.

He had watched the boat in which Talbot was for a time, and then the strange, unnatural calmness which had possessed him gave place to a wild longing to live.

He turned to look for some means of escape, and saw the captain had not been idle.

Already he had lashed a few planks together into a sort of rude raft. This they lowered hastily over the side of the vessel, and then leaped onto it.

They were but just in time.

Scarcely were they a few yards from the ship before she disappeared beneath the waters.

Then followed a time of fearful suffering from exposure to the scorching sun; gnawing, ravenous hunger; thirst which rendered them at times almost mad.

The captain, who had appeared the stronger of the two, was unable to struggle through these hardships.

He died raving of green fields and babbling brooks.

Ned had only just sufficient strength to push the body off the raft. For several hours there it lay, tossed about by the waves first on one side, then the other, filling his weakened mind with a fearful dread.

He would cover his eyes, and pray that it might be taken from his sight; only, when I looked again, to see it close beside him.

A Spanish sailing vessel at last picked him up, just as he had given up all hope.

A long illness followed. They were kindly people, those rough sailors, in their way, and they did their best for him. At the first port they touched at they carried him ashore, and took him to a hospital.

There he lay for many weeks between life and death; then, when his health was partially restored, and he was considered sufficiently strong to leave the hospital, he found himself a stranger in an unknown town, with only a few shillings in his pocket, and with no means of returning to America.

Of course, he might write to his friends, but it would be long before he could receive an answer, and in the meantime he might starve.

He did write, however, though the letter never got to its destination; and there is no knowing what fresh troubles he might not have experienced, but that at last fortune seemed tired of serving him ill turns.

One day, as he was moodily looking into the window of a baker's shop, wondering how he could, to the best advantage, invest his only remaining coin, some one struck him familiarly on the shoulder.

He was in no humor to take a joke, and looked round angrily—to see an old college chum, one of his greatest friends, though they had not met for years.

Of course, all his troubles ceased from that time.

His friend was on a yachting cruise, and Ned returned with him to America.

"Oh, Ned," I cry, as he finishes his story, "it is terrible to think of all you have gone through!"

"My child," he says, raising my hand to his lips, "I am glad of it all. If it had not been for that shipwreck, perhaps I should never have learnt that my little Maggie loved me."

There is a sound of horse's hoofs on the road before me, advancing at a sharp trot, so I draw away the hand Ned was still holding.

The rider, as he sees us, gives a glad cry. It is Talbot. He pulls up his horse so suddenly, that it almost falls back upon its haunches, and, springing to the ground, grasps Ned's two hands.

"Doctor Bathurst! You here—alive and well? What joy that you were not suffered to give your life for mine! Oh, what a load is off my mind!" Then, glancing at me,—"You see how mistaken you were—how useless would have been the sacrifice. You and Maggie are worthy of each other. How happy you will be! But think of me sometimes; keep a corner in your hearts for me! I must not detain you now. I will come and see you early in the morning; there is so much for me to hear."

He tries to speak cheerfully, but his voice falters, and I think I see his tears gathering as he turns from us hurriedly and mounts his horse.

We look after him as he rides away till he is enveloped in the darkness.

"Maggie," Ned says, "he is not happy. We must do what little we can to brighten his life; it has been a very sad one."

For answer, I lay my cheek against his rough coat-sleeves. I cannot trust myself to speak, for I know the tears are so near the surface. They are tears of sympathy, not of sorrow. My cup of happiness is so full, it pains me to think of others' troubles.

Then we turn from the dark road, and enter the little garden, where a welcome light streams from the windows of the cottage.

So, leaving the shadows of the past behind us, we look forward to a bright and happy future.

THE END.

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